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"FOREST BEATNIKS" AND "URBAN THOREAUS": BEAT LITERATURE AND NATURE

By

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ABSTRACT

"FOREST BEATNIKS" AND "URBAN THOREAUS":
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Since the Beat Movement first rose to attention in 1955, critics have tended to view it as an urban phenomenon--the product of a post-war youth culture with roots in the cities of New York and San Francisco. This study examines another side of the Beat Movement: its strong desire for a reconnection with nature. Although each took a different path in attaining this goal, the four writers considered here--Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure--sought a new and closer connection with the natural world.

For Snyder, a significant part of this reconnection with nature involved breaking down the barriers which had previously kept discussion of the human body--and human sexuality--out of the most genteel of American literary genres: nature writing. One of Snyder's most enduring contributions in the field of nature writing has been to successfully reintegrate the human body into the landscape as a natural element.

Kerouac's path back to the natural world, as evidenced in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), made use of a number of models from both American and Chinese traditions. Using Han-Shan, Thoreau, and Muir as models for a prophesied "rucksack revolution," Kerouac's writing about nature anticipates the counterculture's emerging interest in nature and ecology.

California poet Lew Welch chose a hermit's gradual withdrawal into what he called "the world that is not man" as his means of reconnection to the natural world. This study's chapter on Welch examines the process of this withdrawal through both his poetry and letters.

For McClure, the means of reconnection with nature is found in the modern scientific disciplines of biology and ecology. Among McClure's poetic goals are the rediscovery of what he has termed "the biological self," and the realization of humanity's "mammalian possibilities."

The final chapter examines the work of several other writers of the Beat period and their contributions in regard to nature and environmental writing: Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, Kirby Doyle, Ed Sanders, and Richard Brautigan. Finally, the conclusion examines the impact of the Beats on the environmental movement of the 1970's and on the development of the current "Deep Ecology" perspective.

For Anne:

"Without her, what is there to say,

or do?"

Lew Welch, "The Uses of Poetry"

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I. INTRODUCTION:

"FOREST BEATNIKS" AND "URBAN THOREAUS"

"I too am not a bit tamed . . . . I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of the day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the
shadowed wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk."

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1855)

Early in the fall of 1965, two bearded young hikers traveled along a ridge in Oregon's Glacier Peak Wilderness Area. One was of slight build, with a scholar's Vandyke and close-cropped red hair hidden beneath an Alpine climber's hat. His companion, broader in stature, wore the dark curls which surrounded his balding crown at shoulder length, and sported a full, flowing beard. As they walked they chanted, their hiking boots lending cadence to a spirited voicing of "Hari Om Namo Shiva."[1] Along the trail, they met a small party of fishermen--two men, a woman and a child--who stopped short and stared with curiosity at both the appearance and actions of the pair. In 1965 it was fast becoming commonplace to encounter members of the youth counter-culture in the West Coast's urban areas, but the fishermen were clearly taken aback to find them here, in the Oregon wilderness. Sensing their bewilderment, the long-haired hiker graciously explained: "WE are *forest beatniks*" (Snyder, *Earth House Hold* 96).

The two wild looking travelers were Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, two poets who a decade earlier had helped to launch the literary and social phenomenon which has come to be known as the Beat movement. Although almost certainly intended as a joke (writers within the Beat circle rarely referred to themselves with the diminutive term "beatnik"), Ginsberg's explanation to the fishermen, "WE are *forest beatniks*," does point out that, in the minds of many Americans, by the mid-sixties the Beat movement was primarily associated with urban life. The emphasis added to the statement spoken by Ginsberg, and in the written version later recorded in Snyder's journal of the trip, seems to acknowledge this perception, and in some small way, attempts to correct it.[2]

Only in recent years has there been a measurable change in this perception among literary critics and social historians of the fifties and sixties; we are still, it seems, surprised at the idea of associating Beat writers with nature and with what Sherman Paul has referred to as "the green American tradition" of artists finding meaning in the natural world (*Repossessing* xiii). Today, nearly forty years after the Beats first came to the public's attention following the 1955 Six Gallery reading in San Francisco, the major Beat writers are still viewed primarily as an urban phenomenon. Many critics and social historians continue to depict the group as literary outlaws more closely resembling Henry Miller than Henry Thoreau, whose main interests--jazz, drugs, free love, and experimental literature--align them with William, but not John, Burroughs. Despite the fact that nature plays a key role in many of the group's central texts--the novels of Kerouac, the essays of Snyder and McClure, and the poetry of Snyder, Ginsberg, Welch, Kerouac, Whalen, and McClure, among others--little critical attention has been given to this important theme of Beat literature.[3]

Recently, however, environmental historians have begun to understand the role played by Beat writers in America's developing ecological awareness. Bill Devall and George Sessions, in their influential 1985 book, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered*, point to the early work of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts and other Beat era

writers as influential voices who helped to open Western literature and philosophy to Zen, Tao, and other Eastern traditions which promoted ecological consciousness (100-101). Similarly, wilderness historian Roderick Nash, in his 1989 study *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, finds the novels of Jack Kerouac and the poetry and essays of Gary Snyder highly influential in the formation of "an ethic that combined Buddhist and Native American principles with American natural-rights ideology," resulting in a new and broadened ethical view which sought to include both human and non-human nature (114).

In large part, however, the recognition that nature and ecological concerns have long been a part of Beat literature has come from the movement's writers themselves. Writing in the vitae which serves as an introduction to his collected travel sketches *Lonesome Traveler* (1960), Jack Kerouac spoke of the critics' misconception of his life's work:

> [I] always considered writing my duty on earth. Also the preachment of universal kindness, which hysterical critics have failed to notice beneath frenetic activity of my true-story novels about the "beat" generation.--Am actually not "beat" but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic... (vi)

Kenneth Rexroth, mentor as well as participant in the San Francisco Renaissance, noted in an essay in 1971, at the height of the decade's ecological awareness phenomenon, that Beat writers had been at the forefront of the new consciousness all along:

> Long before ecology became a world-wide fad, Snyder and Whalen, still in college, were talking about an ecological esthetic, a blending of American Indian and Far Eastern philosophies of cooperation with, rather than conquest of, nature. (*Retort* 156)

Michael McClure, one of the five poets featured at the Six Gallery Reading, has been the most vocal member of the Beat movement in attempting to correct what he sees as a public misconception concerning nature and Beat writing--at times referring to the Beats as "the literary wing of the new deeper more myriad nature consciousness" in America.[4]

In his essay "The Beat Surface," from his 1982 collection *Scratching the Beat Surface,* McClure notes that from its inception, Beat literature has found an important theme in the natural world:

> Much of what the Beat Generation is about is nature--the landscape of nature in the case of Gary Snyder, the mind as nature in the case of Allen Ginsberg. Consciousness is a natural organic phenomenon. The Beats shared an interest in Nature, Mind, and Biology--areas that they expanded and held together with their radical political or antipolitical stance. (11)

That American readers missed this persistent presence of nature in Beat literature and have come to view the Beats as urban figures is understandable--especially when one considers the works which first established the Beats in the nation's consciousness. Jack Kerouac's first novel, *The Town & the City* (1950), John Clellon Holmes's *Go* (1952), William Burroughs's *Junkie* (1953), and, perhaps most importantly, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) all depicted a frantic, hard-edged, and at times degrading view of life on what the poet called "the negro streets" of American cities.

The nation's popular press further accentuated this view of the Beats as city dwellers. New York's Greenwich Village, long a stronghold of America's literary Bohemians, became a focal point for journalists wishing to track the Beat phenomenon, as did San Francisco's North Beach. In a 1959 *Life* photo story on the Beats, "The Only Rebellion Around," Paul O'Neil noted that "Bohemianism is not new to big American cities. . . ." So it was not surprising that what he referred to as the Beat "Cult of the Pariah," like other literary Bohemians before them, chose to inhabit the seamier side of the urban landscape: "It yearns for the roach-guarded mores of the skid road, the flophouse, the hobo jungle and the slum, primarily to escape regimentation" (115). Even more misleading were sociological texts, such as Ned Polsky's 1967 work *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, which viewed the Beat Movement as not only as an urban phenomenon--but also as an urban problem. Polsky's study examines "the sociology of deviance" among three major urban

groups: pool hustlers, pornographers, and the Beats of Greenwich Village (7). Polsky's association of Village Beats with the other "deviant" urban groups in his text, along with his repeated depictions of Beats as lazy, poorly educated, promiscuous, drug addicts, no doubt strengthened the general public's notion of Beat culture as being synonymous with life in the inner city.

But what O'Neil, Polsky, and many other critics of the period failed to understand, is that although American cities do provide the setting for a number of early and influential Beat texts, in general these works do not celebrate urban life; often, in fact, they demonstrate a pronounced distaste for cities. Ginsberg's "Howl" (1955), the most famous Beat text, is, as John H. Johnston has noted in his study *The Poet and the City* (1984), "above all a city poem" (242). But, the critic points out, "Howl" can be seen as a twentieth century version of William Blake's "London," a poem which chronicles the maddening and harrowing effects of life within the confines of the city. Whereas Blake told his readers of the "Marks of weakness, marks of woe" to be found among the "charter'd" streets of London, Ginsberg graphically displays the insane realities of New Yorkers in the mid-twentieth century:

> who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar
> to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,
> a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the
> stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of
> the moon. (10)

The poet also relies heavily on urban imagery in his denunciation of the evil effects of Moloch on American culture; at times, Moloch and the modern metropolis are merged into one:

> Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose
> skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!
> Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog. Moloch

whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities! (17)

Likewise, Lew Welch's "Chicago Poem" (1958), although obviously set in the city, finds little of value or beauty in the "City of the Big Shoulders" as Carl Sandburg had forty years earlier; instead there are only the smoke and fumes of a wasteland where men "Stoop at 35 possibly cringing from the heavy and terrible sky":

In the mills and refineries of its south side Chicago
passes its natural gas in flames
Bouncing like bunsens from stacks a hundred feet high.
The stench stabs at your eyeballs.
The whole sky green and yellow backdrop for the skeleton
steel of a bombed-out town. (*Ring of Bone* 10)

While often writing from within the bounds of the modern city, many Beat writers began to question the path that the nation was taking towards military and industrial world dominance. These "urban Thoreaus," as Kerouac once called them (*Subterraneans* 15), like their philosophical ancestors the nineteenth-century American Romantics, dreaded the power of the state and its growing technocracy. As critic John Tytell has noted in his influential study of the Beats, *Naked Angels*: "The Beat movement was a crystallization of a sweeping discontent with American 'virtues' of progress and power. What began with an exploration of the bowels and entrails of the city--criminality, drugs, mental hospitals--evolved into an expression of the visionary sensibility" (4). And, like Thoreau and the other Romantics who preceded them, many members of the Beat movement turned away from the city and towards nature for the source of this vision. For while many of the themes and ideas expressed in the literature of the Beat movement were indeed radically different from anything which had come before them in American literature--active experimentation with psychedelic drugs, a far more open stance towards sexuality, and a rejection of the economic status quo--one of the primary themes present in the work of

several key members of the Beat movement is much more traditional: the need to forge a reconnection to the natural world.

"Real Work"

The life experiences of many of the Beat writers strongly suggest that nature played an enduring role throughout much of their early lives, and several chose work which would put them in the outdoors on a daily basis. In a post-war period in American letters which seemed to value only academic and intellectual points of view, the Beats stood apart as writers who placed a high value on the experiences of both the mind and body, and who often prided themselves on their physical, as well as intellectual, accomplishments. "I've held employment on all levels of society," writes Gary Snyder. "I can pride myself in the fact that I worked nine months on a tanker at sea and nobody once ever guessed I had been to college" (*Real Work* 111). For many of the Beat writers, work became an important link to the natural world, and an important source of inspiration for their writing.

After a childhood spent on a dairy farm near Puget Sound, Gary Snyder worked on the forest trail crews of Yosemite National Park in the early fifties. Snyder credits the job, and his surroundings, with the inspiration and the creative grist for his first collection of poems, *Riprap* (1959), a book which he dedicated to a long list of fellow workers "In the woods & at sea." In an afterword to the book's forth printing in 1990, the poet recalled how the poems were conceived:

> They [the U.S. Forest Service] soon had me working in the upper reaches of the Piute Creek drainage, a land of smooth white granite and gnarly juniper and pine. It all carries the visible memory of the ice age. The bedrock is so brilliant that it shines back at the crystal night stars. In a curious mind of renunciation and long day's hard work with shovel, pick, dynamite, and boulder, my language relaxed

into itself. I began to be able to meditate, nights, after work, and I found myself writing some poems that surprised me. (65)

As Snyder suggests here, many of the poems in his first collection do seem to spring from a combination of work, nature, and the meditative mind. The book's title, *Riprap*, refers to a method of laying heavy stone cobbles to make mountain trails for horse travel or hiking. In addition says Snyder, the title "celebrates the work of hands, the placing of rock, and my first glimpse of the image of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting and mutually embracing" (*Riprap* 65-66). Laying out the heavy slabs of stone, Snyder found in his trail crew experience a powerful metaphor for his other occupation--working with words as a poet. The title poem to the collection begins:

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
in space and time: (32)

During these years, the poet also worked as a seasonal forest fire lookout in the remote Crater Mountain and Sourdough Mountain regions of Washington State. These wilderness experiences provided the raw material for a great deal of Snyder's early work, especially his collections *Riprap* (1959), *The Back Country* (1967), and *Earth House Hold* (1969). In 1954, after being fired from his Forest Service job because of his affiliations during the period's anti-Communist hysteria,[5] Snyder worked as a choke setter involved in harvesting timber with the Warm Springs Lumber Company in the Oregon Cascade range, an experience described poetically in *Myths & Texts* (1960), and more recently, in his excellent essay "Ancient Forests of the Far West" from his collection *The Practice of the Wild* (1990).

In addition to the substantial time Snyder spent in the forests of the Northwest, the author also spent the better part of 1957 as a merchant seaman in the Pacific on board an oil tanker *The Sappa Creek*, a period chronicled in "Tanker Notes" (included in his 1969 collection *Earth House Hold*) and such poems as "The Sappa Creek" and "Cartagena," both included in *Riprap*. Snyder's friend and fellow poet Michael McClure also spent a portion of 1957 working on ship-board, visiting Pacific ports in Hong Kong, Japan, Manilla, and Hawaii.[6]

East coast Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac also served on merchant ships during the forties and fifties. The author of "Howl" worked on several merchant ships immediately following his discharge from an abortive term in the U.S. Navy in 1945. A decade later, in July 1956, while waiting for the first printing of *Howl* to be released by City Lights, Ginsberg signed on for a voyage aboard the Navy's *Sgt. Jack J. Pendelton*. The *Pendelton's* mission would take it from San Francisco north to Point Barrow, Alaska, more than 300 miles north of the arctic circle in order to supply the government's Early Warning radar station located there (Miles 207-10).

Kerouac's stint as a seaman, like Ginsberg's, also included a brief attempt at military life in the U.S. Navy. In 1942, the young novelist was a member of the crew of the *S.S. Dorchester*, a ship which ferried materials and workers to Greenland in support of the war effort. Later the same year, he enlisted in the Navy, but was discharged after six months with what the Navy claimed was an "indifferent character." Apparently unable to fit into military discipline, but still yearning for life on the sea, within months Kerouac again signed up as a merchant seaman, this time on board the *S.S. George Weems*, which carried in its cargo hold a load of ammunition bound for Liverpool, England (Charters 37-42). The author's time as a seaman gave rise to his first attempt at a novel, an unfinished effort entitled *The Sea Is My Brother*, as well as portions of one of his final novels, *Vanity of Dulouz* (1968) and his sketch "Slobs of the Kitchen Sea," collected among his travel pieces in *Lonesome Traveler* (1960).

In later years, Kerouac subsidized what had not yet become a lucrative writing career with a number of jobs--many of which placed him in close contact with nature. Like his friend Neal Cassidy, who served as both catalyst and role model for several of the Beats, Kerouac worked as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific railroad in the early fifties. The job provided the author an opportunity to view first-hand those men he would later call "The Vanishing America Hobo"--the sometimes romantic figures who hopped freights and traveled the West with only a rucksack on their back, hoboes who became a model for Kerouac's own view of himself as "an adventurer, a lonesome traveler" (*Lonesome Traveler* v). The time Kerouac spent on the railroads also gave him the subject matter for one of his finest prose sketches: "The Railroad Earth." Ostensibly the sketch concerns itself with the author's days as a brakeman, but at times it is a rhapsodic love poem to the California landscape:

> The sweetness of the fields unspeakable--the names themselves bloody edible like Lick Coyote Perry Madrone Morgan Hill San Martin Rucker Gilroy o sleepy Gilroy Carnadero Corporal Sargent Chittenden Logan Aromas and Watsonville Junction with the Pajaro River passing through it and we of the railroads pass over its wooded dry Indian draws at somewhere outside Chittenden where one morning all dew pink I saw a little bird sitting on a piece of stanchion straight up wood in the wild tangle, and it was the Bird of Chittenden, and the meaning of morning. (*Lonesome Traveler 77-78*)

In 1956, with the help of his friend and roommate at the time, Gary Snyder, Kerouac landed a Forest Service job as a forest fire lookout in the Cascade Range of northwest Washington. The months spent in solitude on the mountain were the basis for some of Kerouac's most nature-centered texts, including *The Dharma Bums* (1958), *Desolation Angels* (1965), and the sketch "Alone on a Mountaintop," collected in *Lonesome Traveler* (1960).

The California poet Lew Welch, after spending much of his early career as a copy writer for Chicago advertising firms, took an abrupt mid-life turn and opted instead for the existence of a hermit in the foothills of the California Sierras. In order to support his work as a poet, in the early sixties Welch worked at a number of jobs--including commercial fishing in the small fleet of salmon trollers off the San Francisco coast. In an essay on the experience he wrote a few years later, Welch lamented his "many years working at foolish, exhausting, tiresome, humiliating jobs" and described the "oppressive vision of what it is that a smart strong man might devote his entire life to Post Toasties or Prudential Life Insurance." In place of this empty corporate existence, the poet was able to find meaning in what he called the "real work"[7] of salmon trolling (*I Remain* II, 43-44). Defending his choice of vocations, Welch eloquently sums up the importance of his decision to work close to the natural world:

> I have lived all my life with people who will laugh at all of this, being too sophisticated to hear what I said except as "another plea to return to nature." But nature is larger than that, expressible in the word-game "Nature." It is all that goes on whether we look at it or not. All-that-goes-on-whether-we-look-at-it-or-not will always go on (though we almost never look at it) and we are in it, in this form, for a little while at least. There is nothing to join since we are as much a charter member as the jellyfish is, as the seasons are. The rest is what drives us mad. And you do know exactly what the rest is. (*I Remain* II, 43)

Welch's friend and Reed College classmate, Philip Whalen, like Snyder and Kerouac, also worked as a forest fire lookout in the Skagit Valley region of Washington's Mount Baker National Forest, where he spent the warm months of 1952 through 1955. Whalen found the lookout's job well suited to the vocation of writing, providing ample time and solitude to meditate, read, and write while perched in a windowed tower high above the forest canopy. Just as Snyder had internalized the physical task of laying riprap trails and found in the work both a source and a vehicle for his poetic voice, Whalen found life as a

wilderness fire watch to be an experience which altered both the content and the form of his writing. In a 1994 interview he described to me the effects of the experience on his craft:

> Living where you must chop wood for the stove and carry water to cook and clean is enough to change anybody's point of view, writer or otherwise. Sometimes you don't carry water, you carry snow and melt it. A great deal of snow is necessary for the purpose. After the chores are done there is time to re-read all of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and some of the longer 18th century English novels and a few of the larger Russian ones. Such reading supplies one's vocabulary with words which are not generally used in current newspapers and magazines. The contemplation of nearby lakes and mountain peaks simultaneously stimulates and calms the mind and imagination as do frequent encounters with wildlife--bears, deer, marmots, etc. It was during this period of time that I learned that I could write in my own way rather than to follow academic prescriptions as to form, composition, metrics and diction. (1)

Whalen describes the wilderness setting and the transformation he experienced there in his early long poem "Sourdough Mountain Lookout" (1956):

> Then I'm alone in a glass house on a ridge
> Encircled by chiming mountains
> With one sun roaring through the house all day
> & the others crashing through the glass all night
> conscious even while sleeping (*On Bear's Head* 46)

It was here, at the Sourdough lookout tower in September of 1955, that Whalen was to receive a letter from Gary Snyder inviting him to read, along with himself, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Lamantia at the Six Gallery reading--the event which would mark the beginning of Whalen's success as a writer, and the American public's introduction to the Beat movement (Christensen 557).

"Starting From San Francisco":
The Roots of the Beat Movement and the Six Gallery Reading

Early in October 1955, two hundred postcards were mailed to members of San Francisco's North Beach arts community. Simple in design, the cards promised an evening's entertainment unlike any the city had before witnessed:

> Six poets at the Six Gallery. Kenneth Rexroth, M.C. Remarkable collection of angels all gathered at once in the same spot. Wine, music, dancing girls, serious poetry, free satori. Small collection for wine and postcards. Charming event. (Miles 195)

This "charming event" was, of course, the now famous Six Gallery reading--the cornerstone of what quickly became known as the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, and the beginning of the rapid rise to public attention of Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure. The reading, chronicled in the opening chapters of Kerouac's 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, marked a number of important firsts in American letters. It was, for several of the writers involved--Snyder, Ginsberg, McClure and Whalen--their first public reading. The event also featured the first public reading of Ginsberg's "Howl," the poem which both launched, and for a time, defined, the Beat movement.

But literary movements do not begin in a single night, and it would be a serious mistake to treat the 1955 Six Gallery reading as the precise moment in which the Beat movement "began." Although the reading did for the first time focus public attention on the phenomenon known as the San Francisco Renaissance, and on an emerging group of young writers who later came to be known as the Beats, the event's primary historical importance is that it marks the convergence of two major contingents of American writers--one from the West coast and one from the East--who had already been at work for nearly a decade.

The first group--West coast writers like Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, and later, Lew Welch--had gravitated towards San Francisco in the early fifties, drawn to the city by forces which seemed, according to Snyder's description in his essay "North Beach," biological as well as political:

> In the spiritual and political loneliness of America of the fifties you'd hitch a thousand miles to meet a friend. Whatever lives needs a habitat, a proper culture of warmth and moisture to grow. West coast of those days, San Francisco was the only city. . .
>
> A habitat. The Trans-America pyramid, a strikingly wasteful and arrogant building, stands square on what was once called Montgomery Block, a building that housed the artists and revolutionaries of the thirties and forties. Kenneth Rexroth, many others lived there; foundations of post-war libertarianism; moves that became publicly known as "beat" in the middle fifties. (*Old Ways* 45-47)

This northern California "habitat" which Snyder describes, with its unique mixture of the artistic and the political, had long been a gathering place for both writers and political advocates concerned with preserving the natural world. Since the late nineteenth century, conservationists like John Muir and Warren Olney had made the area a focal point in the effort to preserve the American wilderness. Here, Muir and others formed the Sierra Club in 1892, dedicated to exploring and preserving the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast. And it was here, in 1913, that the group fought unsuccessfully, in the landmark Hetch Hetchy case, to prevent the damming of the nearby Toulumne River and the resulting destruction of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the California Sierras. Even in the early years of the twentieth century, it seems, environmental activism and cultural bohemianism went hand in hand; in 1910, San Francisco's city engineer Marsden Manson noted that the group opposing construction of the dam was largely made up of "short-haired women and long-haired men" (quoted in Nash *Wilderness* 169).

The American West Coast was also heavily steeped in Asian culture, owing heavily to the large numbers of Chinese and Japanese immigrants who had worked and settled in the region during the 1900's. Buddhism and other Eastern religions flourished here among the Asian-American population, and a small but dedicated number of European-Americans began to share an interest in Eastern religion and literature.

American philosophers had dabbled in Eastern thought as far back as 1844, when Henry Thoreau had first translated a Buddhist text. But in the 1940's with World War II and the U.S. occupation of Japan, when, as Kenneth Rexroth has noted "captivity took captivity captive," American interest in Buddhism skyrocketed (*Retort* 155). In the decade that followed, Buddhist scholars and teachers such as D.T. Suzuki, and later, Alan Watts, made Eastern religion and culture accessible to thousands of receptive Americans--especially those who lived near the hub of Buddhist activity in San Francisco. West coast Beat writers such as Whalen, Welch, and Snyder were among them. [8]

For Snyder especially, an interest in Buddhism was also accompanied by an interest in Oriental literature--especially the work of nature poets such as Han-shan, the Chinese hermit / poet of the seventh century T'ang dynasty, whose "Cold Mountain Poems" Snyder translated while a student at Berkeley. The twenty-four translations, later collected and published in the same volume with Snyder's *Riprap* (*Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems,* Four Seasons 1969), present a vision parallel to Snyder's own wilderness poems--separated by geographic distance and a dozen centuries, but very similar in content:

> Clambering up the Cold Mountain path,
> The Cold Mountain trail goes on and on:
> The long gorge choked with scree and boulders,
> The wide creek, the mist blurred grass.
> The moss is slippery, though there's been no rain
> The pine sings, but there's no wind.
> Who can leap the world's ties

And sit with me among the white clouds? (46)

While West coast Beats such as Snyder, Whalen, and Welch were eager to search out ancient Far Eastern models for their writing, these writers were also able to trace a long and illustrious heritage among earlier writers of their own region who had concerned themselves with nature. Jack London's turn of the century novels such as *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) were penned here, as was John Muir's best selling 1894 volume *The Mountains of California*. In a 1994 interview with me, Gary Snyder recalled that his reading of Muir's wilderness essays influenced him on a practical level as well as in a literary sense:

> I read Muir as an adolescent, . . . Muir inspired me, as a lad, on the practical level of boldly going out and staying longer in the wood with less gear, and having the nerve to do solo trips. So I did (for example) some lengthy trips in the summer of 1948 in the mountains north of Mt. St. Helens in the Washington Cascades, including some third-class rock scrambles.

Through reading, through writing, and through the kind of conscious replecation which Snyder describes here, West Coast Beat writers became the inheritors of a rich literary tradition of the Pacific region. William Everson, poet and later chronicler of the San Francisco renaissance, has called Snyder, Whalen and Welch the foremost "purely native voices" of the West Coast during the Beat period, and finds their work in the tradition of what he has termed "the Western archetype" embodied by earlier writers of the region (*Archetype West* 141).[9]

A more recent, and more direct, literary antecedent to the West coast Beat writers was California poet Robinson Jeffers, who in the 1930's began to capture readers' imaginations with a view of the world which was markedly less anthropocentric than any before encountered in American literature. Writing from his vantage point at Tor House near Big Sur on the California coastline, Jeffers adopted an ecological perspective in his poetry, a

perspective which urged his readers to view themselves as only a tiny part of the universe--not the center of it. His 1938 poem, "The Answer," warned readers that:

> . . .[T]he great beauty is
> Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and
> things, the divine
> beauty of the universe. Love that, not man
> Apart from that, or else you will share man's
> pitiful
> confusions, or drown in despair when his days
> darken. (536)

Snyder has called Jeffers "a very special ancestor" for West Coast poets of the period, finding in the earlier poet's work "a sense of the West as a rare landscape" and "an interest in the evolving Pacific Basin culture" which would become so important in Snyder's later writing (Lauridsen and Dalgard 67).[10]

Perhaps the poet who provided the greatest link between the past and the present for West Coast Beat writers of the mid-fifties was Kenneth Rexroth. Long a serious student of Buddhism and advocate for nature, Rexroth became an important mentor for several of the young Beat writers as they arrived in San Francisco. In the older poet's work, Snyder, McClure and Whalen no doubt recognized a useful model. Since his early poetry of the 1940's, Rexroth's work had always featured a distinct reverence for the natural world--often paired with an anarchist's distaste for American industrialism and militarism. In the mid-fifties this theme became even more pronounced, as it is in this excerpt from "The American Century," a poem later collected in Rexroth's 1956 volume entitled *In Defense of the Earth*. In a dark reversal of Henry Luce's famous prediction of American ascendancy, poet depicts a nature outing with his young daughter, and a natural world changed forever by the specter of the arms race:

> . . .Now she

Runs to me with a tuft of rose
Gray owl's clover. "What's that? Oh! What's that?"
She hoots like an owl and caresses
The flower when I tell her its name.
Overhead in the deep sky
Of May Day jet bombers cut long
White slashes of smoke. The blackbird
Sings and the baby laughs, midway
In the century of horror. (28)

East Coast Beats, such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, brought to San Francisco their own literary roots--roots which reflected an conventional undergraduate education at Columbia as well as some very unconventional education post-graduate work with William S. Burroughs, Herbert Hunke, Neal Cassidy and other underworld figures of New York City's Time Square. At Columbia, they found in American Romanticism a strain of thought with which they felt a close connection. As John Tytell has noted, in his discussion of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs, the nineteenth century New England Transcendentalists were key figures in the three writers' development:

> Their spiritual ancestors were men like Thoreau with his aggressive idealism, his essentially conservative distrust of machines and industry, his desire to return to the origins of man's relations to the land; or Melville, with his adventurous tolerance of different tribal codes; or Whitman, optimistically proclaiming with egalitarian gusto the raw newness and velocity of self-renewing change in America while joyously admiring the potential of the common man. (4)

In addition to the nineteenth century American Romantics, East Coast Beat writers had another very powerful influence in Dr. William Carlos Williams, the poet / physician of Ginsberg's home town of Paterson, New Jersey. Williams was an inspiration to many poets in the Beat circle--Snyder, Welch, Creely, Levertov, and Whalen--for his insistence

on free verse and poetic diction which approximated everyday speech; but it was Allen Ginsberg on whom the writer had the greatest impact. Many of Ginsberg's earliest poems, later collected in *Empty Mirror* (1961) are written in the tight, Imagist form of Williams's early work. Williams himself wrote the introduction to the collection, just as he had done for *Howl and Other Poems* several years earlier.

As a youth growing up in Paterson, Ginsberg had known Williams and enjoyed a lengthy correspondence with the elder poet for much of his adult life. It is not surprising then, that Ginsberg's character should find its way into Williams's magnum opus *Paterson*, the long poem which he constructed during the years 1946 to 1958. Several of Ginsberg's letters are included in the poem, and his is one of the many voices which combine to give a collective persona to the title city.[11] *Patterson* was, and is, an important poem to those interested in the depiction of the American landscape in all of its stages of development, and it seems to anticipate much of the later Beat writing on the subject. Like Ginsberg's "Howl," it portrays the modern city as a confused and chaotic jumble--a mirror image of a chaotic and perhaps insane mind. "I began thinking of writing a long poem upon the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city," wrote Williams (quoted in Sharpe 136).

> Yet there is
> no return: rolling up out of chaos,
> a nine month's wonder, the city
> the man, an identity--it can't be
> otherwise--an interpenetration, both ways. (*Paterson* 12)

And like much of the later poetry of Snyder, *Patterson* is doggedly concerned with the issue of place. Williams's poem is, above all, an effort at knowing one specific locale with minute intimacy: its people, its history, its land, and its rivers. All these elements do not coexist peacefully in *Paterson*, however; as William Sharpe notes in his study *Unreal*

Cities, "The poem is replete with images of the urban dislocation of the natural world" (147):

> a bud forever green,
> tight curled, upon the pavement, perfect
> in juice and substance but divorced, divorced
> from its fellows, fallen low-- (28)

When Ginsberg arrived in San Francisco early in 1955, he carried with him a letter of introduction written by Williams and addressed to Kenneth Rexroth--a document which in a very real way served as a bridge between the factions of young poets the two had inspired and nurtured (Miles 171). In less than a year's time, the two groups would meet, and for a time, become one--as the Beat movement gained momentum at the Six Gallery reading.

It had been Rexroth who had suggested the names of the reading's participants when he was asked by one of the gallery's owners, Wally Hedrick, if he knew any poets willing to put on a reading. Under the impetus of Rexroth, Ginsberg contacted the other four poets who were to take part in the event: Snyder, McClure, Whalen and Lamantia. Although Rexroth was to serve only as master of ceremonies for the evening, and read none of his own work, out of respect for their mentor the younger poets included him as the sixth poet at the reading. Ginsberg later recalled: "Then Gary [Snyder] and I decided that we ought to invite Rexroth to be the sixth--sixth poet--to introduce us at the Six Gallery, to be the elder, since he had linked us up" (Gifford 198-99).

The setting for the event was an auto repair shop which had recently been turned into a cooperative art gallery by a group of young artists from the San Francisco Art Institute. As the poets arrived on the evening of October 7, 1955, they were surprised to find well over one hundred people in attendance, drinking wine and milling about waiting for the reading to begin (McClure *Surface* 12-13).

As Michael McClure has pointed out in his essay "The Beat Surface," a good deal of the poetry read that night at the Six Gallery reflected a strong interest in the natural world.[12] With the exception of the event's first reader, the American Surrealist poet Philip Lamantia, who instead of reading from his own work chose to pay tribute to his recently deceased friend John Hoffman by reading several of his poems, all of the poets present at the event presented works which displayed a longing for a reconnection with nature.

Michael McClure followed Lamantia as the evening's second reader. The youngest of the poets, McClure was a Mid-Westerner who had migrated to California earlier in the decade to pursue his life-long interests in literature, the natural sciences and mysticism. The works which McClure chose to read for this his first public reading reflect these interests. The first poem he read, "Point Lobos: Animism," is clearly an attempt at viewing the world through fresh eyes. It reads, in part:

Of Animism:

I have been in a spot so full of spirits

That even the most joyful animist

Brooded

When all in sight was less to be cared about

Than death

And there was no noise in the ears

That mattered.

(I knelt in the shade

By a cold salt pool

And felt the entrance of hate

On many legs,

The soul like a clambering

Water vascular system.

No scuttling could matter
Yet I formed in my mind
The most beautiful
Of maxims.
How could I care
For your illness or mine?)
This talk of bodies! (*Hymns* 4-5)

The poem is a curious blend of the primitive and the scientific--a trait common to much of McClure's writing on nature. Here, the primitive notion of animism--the notion that all things are in some way alive and possess a soul--is paired with phrases informed by modern science such as "Water vascular system." While such a juxtaposition of ideas may seem strange, McClure has pointed to early ecologists as the source of the poem's inspiration: "Ernst Haeckel and Alfred North Whitehead believed the universe is a single organism--that the whole thing is alive and that its existence is its sacredness and its breathing" (*Surface* 27).

This concept, of a natural world alive and linked by what McClure has called a visceral "undersoul" (26), was a key element in the poet's early work. Another of the poems he read at the Six Gallery, entitled "For the Death of 100 Whales," extends this recognition of ecological and spiritual interconnectedness with nature to an early plea for the protection of whales. The poem was inspired by an April 1954 article in *Time* which described the mass slaughter of whales by the American military. McClure used portions of the article as a preface to the poem:

> Killer whales. . . .Savage sea cannibals up to thirty feet long with teeth like bayonets. . . one was caught with fourteen seals and thirteen porpoises in its belly . . . often tear at boats and nets . . . destroyed thousands of dollars worth of fishing tackle. . . . Icelandic government appealed to the U.S., which has thousands of

men stationed at a lonely NATO airbase on the subarctic island. Seventy-nine bored G.I.'s responded with enthusiasm. Armed with rifles and machine guns one posse of Americans climbed into four small boats and in one morning wiped out a pack of 100 killers. . . .

First the killers were rounded up into tight formation with concentrated machine gun fire, then moved out again one by one, for the final blast that would kill them . . .as one was wounded, the others would set upon it and tear it to pieces with their jagged teeth. (*Hymns* 7)

The excerpted article is an effective device for holding a mirror up to American attitudes of the 1950's concerning humanity's dominance over nature. The line between "beast" and man is blurred as McClure points out, using the *Time* reporter's own words, that the real "killers" are American G.I.'s. The poem which followed the preface is even more effective in condemning the slaughter:

Hung midsea
Like a boat in midair
The liners boiled their pastures:
The liners of flesh,
The Arctic steamers.

Brains the size of a football
Mouths the size of a door.

The sleek wolves
Mowers and reapers of sea kine.
THE GIANT TADPOLES
(Meat their algae)
Lept

Like sheep or children

Shot from the sea's bore

Turned and twisted

(Goya!!)

Flung blood and sperm.

Incense.

Gnashed at their tales and brothers,

Cursed Christ of mammals,

Snapped at the sun,

Ran for the sea's floor.

Goya! Goya!

Oh Lawrence [13]

No angels dance those bridges.

OH GUN! OH BOW!

There are no churches in the waves,

No holiness,

No passages or crossings

From the beasts' wet shore. (*Hymns* 7-8)

Philip Whalen was the next poet to read. A schoolmate of both Gary Snyder and Lew Welch at Reed College in Oregon, Whalen shared his peers' enthusiasm for both Buddhism and the outdoors, and the poems which Whalen selected to read at the Six Gallery reflect this. The first, "The Road Runner," displays a keen eye for detail in the description of its subject:

Thin long bird

with a taste for snakes' eyes

Frayed tail, wildcat claws
His pinions are bludgeons.

Few brains, topped
By a crown
And a flair for swift in-fighting--
Try to take it from him. (*On Bear's Head* 4)

The forth poet to read at the Six Gallery was Allen Ginsberg--a young poet who only a few weeks before had completed the composition of "Howl," the poem which would gain notice for himself, and indirectly, several other poets present at the reading. While Ginsberg's major works embracing nature and ecology, such as "Wales Visitation" (1967), were more than a decade away, the poet's early work exhibits strong suggestions of a turn towards nature in its virulent condemnation of industrial capitalism and the ills associated with the modern city. Ginsberg's "Howl," like Whitman's "barbaric yawp"[14] which preceded it, takes a part of its inspiration from the natural world and the howling of wolves--a sound which Aldo Leopold had once described as "an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world" (137). The description is as apt for Ginsberg's "Howl" as it is for the wolf's. Ginsberg took the stage and began a rhythmic and emphatic chanting of the long poem, reading, as observer John Montgomery would later recall, "like a referee counting out Nixon."[15]

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for
an angry fix, . . . (*Howl* 9)

The poem marked an important breakthrough for Ginsberg, but perhaps more importantly, this first reading of the poem, and the sensational publicity that both the poem and its author received in the ensuing months, provided a crucial catalyst for the early success of

the Beat movement, thus making Ginsberg at least indirectly responsible for the public's first taste of the more nature centered work of Snyder, Whalen and McClure. As Snyder has noted:

> That reading held in November, 1955 [16]. . . was a curious kind of turning point in American poetry . . . Poetry suddenly seemed useful in 1955 San Francisco . . . *Howl* became the second book published in Ferlinghetti's Pocket Poet series, and Ginsberg's extensive readings all over the United States began to draw audiences of a size not seen before. Kerouac's novels were published, and the "beat generation" was launched. Allen was to a great extent responsible for generating the excitement. (*Real Work* 163)

While Ginsberg's reading of "Howl" has usually been seen as the climax of the Six Gallery reading by most literary historians, Jack Kerouac, himself a close friend and enthusiastic supported of Ginsberg, gave the poet and his poem little emphasis in his slightly fictionalized version of the reading in his 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums*. Instead, Kerouac chose to emphasize the importance of another new voice in American poetry--the evening's final reader, Gary Snyder. In writing about the Six Gallery performance of Japhy Ryder, the fictionalized version of Snyder, whom he termed a "great new hero of American culture" (27), Kerouac enthusiastically described both Snyder's poetry and the poet's life experience:

> And he had his tender lyrical lines, like the ones about bears eating berries, showing his love of animals and great mystery lines about oxen on the Mongolian road showing his knowledge of Oriental literature. . . .And his anarchistic ideas about how Americans don't know how to live, with lines about commuters being trapped in living rooms that come from poor trees felled by chainsaws (showing here, also, his background as a logger up north). (14)

The poem to which Kerouac here refers is Snyder's long piece entitled "A Berry Feast," later collected in *The Back Country* (1968). The poem is an amalgam of Native

American traditions, Eastern religion and ecology which combine to present a portrait of nature quite unlike any which had preceded it in American literature. The poem's protagonist is the figure of Coyote--traditionally seen in Indian myth as the long-enduring trickster of the natural world. Coyote functions as observer to all man's foibles as he struggles to find his place in the natural world, as in this passage in which he observes man's attempts to house himself:

> The chainsaw falls for boards of pine,
> Suburban bedrooms, block on block
> Will waver with this grain and knot,
> The maddening shapes will start and fade
> Each morning when commuters wake--
> Joined boards hung on frames,
> a box to catch a biped in. (*Back Country* 13)

Often, the poem jumps ahead and back in time to portray human history as a long series of crimes against nature. Here, Snyder juxtaposes the deforestation of China during the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.) with modern high-technology logging in the American Northwest:

> Clanks of tread
> oxen of Shang
> moving the measured road
> Bronze bells at the throat
> Bronze balls at the horns, the bright Oxen
> Chanting through sunlight and dust
> wheeling logs down hills
> into heaps,
> the yellow
> Fat-snout Caterpillar, tread toppling forward

Leaf on leaf, roots in gold volcanic dirt. (14)

Despite these images of destruction, the poem does finally offer some hope--if not for man, then for the rest of nature. Snyder's hero, Coyote, endures through all of the environmental destruction wrought by man with an attitude of radical defiance. When told by his fellow creature Magpie that "The people are coming," his response is unmistakable in its intent:

"Fuck you!" sang Coyote
and ran.

The poem ends with a landscape devoid of humans, with only man's buildings left in ruin as a reminder of his presence. The final image is one of smiling victory for coyote, as he watches what was once owned by man return to nature:

From cool springs under cedar
On his haunches, white grin,
long tongue panting, he watches:
Dead city in dry summer,
Where berries grow. (16)

Snyder also read portions of his long epic *Myths & Texts* at the Six Gallery, a work which like "A Berry Feast" is grounded in the poet's long range view of nature and world history:

The ancient forests of China logged
and the hills slipped into the Yellow Sea.
Squared beams, log dogs,
on a tamped-earth sill.
San Francisco 2X4s
were the woods around Seattle:
Someone killed and someone built, a house,
a forest, wrecked or raised

All America hung on a hook

& burned by men in their own praise. (*Myths & Texts* 4)

With the end of Snyder's set, the Six Gallery reading came to a close; but among those who had witnessed it there was a palpable sense of a new direction in American poetry. Michael McClure recalls:

> In all our memories no one had been so outspoken in poetry before--we had gone beyond the point of no return--and we were ready for it, for a point of no return. None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellective void--to the land without poetry--to the spiritual drabness. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision. (*Surface* 13)

A significant portion of this new vision that McClure speaks of was a renewed emphasis on the natural world present in his own writing and in the work of Snyder, Whalen, Ginsberg, and others within the Beat circle. Clearly, this theme was a dominant force in much of the work presented at the movement's first flowering--the Six Gallery reading. Often this new emphasis on nature employed by the Beats involved a mixing of old ways with new: of ancient animism with marine biology, of Zen and Native American beliefs with the modern scientific notion of food chains. Such an unlikely mixture must have seemed truly radical in 1950's America; yet the environmental movement which gained momentum in the 1960's and has continued to thrive into the final years of this century has in large part depended on this blend of what Snyder has called "the old ways" with modern science common to much Beat writing on nature. It is a short philosophical step from the animism offered in McClure's poetry of 1955 to biochemist James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis--the notion that the entire planet functions as a single living organism--one of the most pervasive theories among environmentalists since the early 1970's. Likewise, the Buddhist and Native American traditions which inform much of the early poetry of Whalen, Ginsberg and Snyder have become a mainstay of the American

environmental movement, and a major source of wisdom for the increasingly influential "deep ecology" perspective offered by environmental ethicists such as George Sessions and Bill Devall.

But perhaps even more important than the Beats' merging of older cultural traditions with science was their use of the newest of the sciences--ecology--as a source for their art. Although the basic precepts of ecology had their roots in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead almost half a century earlier, these theories remained vague concepts until scientist / writers such as Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson helped to familiarize them in the post-war years with books such as *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and *The Sea Around Us* (1951). But it was the Beat writers of the 1950's who raised ecology--the discipline which Paul Shepard has called "the subversive science"--to the level of fitting subject matter for art, and in doing so, set the stage for the ecological consciousness of the American 1960's.

NOTES

[1] Shiva is the Hindu god of destruction and reproduction.

[2] Ginsberg's poetry has long made extensive use of the unexpected juxtaposition of dissimilar words (i.e. the image of the "hydrogen jukebox" which he uses to describe the setting of the American 1950's in his most famous work "Howl"). It may be that he considered "forest beatniks" equally unexpected.

[3] The only notable exception is the considerable critical attention paid in recent years to the poetry and essays of Gary Snyder.

[4] Letter to the author. 27 July 1993

[5] See Patrick D. Murphy's *Understanding Gary Snyder* 5.

[6] Letter to the author. Dated "Solstice 93" (21 Dec. 1993).

[7] This phrase, altered slightly in its meaning, also occurs repeatedly in Gary Snyder's work, and in fact, became the title for his first collection of essays and interviews. Says Snyder: ". . . all of us will come back again to hoe in the ground, or gather wild potato bulbs with digging sticks, or hand-adze a beam, or skin a pole, or scrape a hive--we're never going to get away from that. We've been living in a dream that we're going to get away from it, that we won't have to do it again. Put that out of our minds. We'll always do that work. That work is going to be there. . . And that's the *real work*: to make the world as real as it is, and to find ourselves as real as we are within it" (*The Real Work* 81-82).

[8] For a more complete discussion of this phenomenon, see Rick Fields's *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 195-224, and Carl Jackson's "The Counterculture Looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion." *American Studies*. Vol. xxix, Number 1 (Spring 1988): 51-70.

[9] Other critics have written essays which place the Beats in the literary tradition of the American West. See Thomas J. Lyon's "Gary Snyder, A Western Poet" in *Western*

American Literature 3 (1968): 207-16. A more intimately regional approach to Beat writing can be found in David Robertson's "Real Matter, Spiritual Mountain: Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac on Mt. Tamalpais" in *Western American Literature* 3 (1992): 209-26. See also Edward Abbey's reflections on his own "beatnik" days in Northern California during the mid-fifties in "A San Francisco Journal" from his collection *One Life at a Time, Please*, 51-84.

[10] In later years, Snyder would temper his high regard for the ecological perspective in the work of Jeffers with doubts about the older poet's cloistered, at times hostile, perspective on the subject of humanity and nature. In a 1992 poem, "Word Basket Woman," he notes:

> Robinson Jeffers, his tall cold view
> quite true in a way, but why did he say it
> as though he alone
> stood above our delusions, he also
> feared death, insignificance,
> and was not quite up to the inhuman beauty
> of parsnips or diapers, the deathless
> nobility at the core of all ordinary things. (*No Nature* 371)

[11] Ginsberg is referred to in the poem as "A.P.," the initials meaning "A Poet." See Ginsberg's *Journals: Early Fifties Early Sixties*, 4.

[12] In an interview I conducted in March 1994, Philip Whalen concurred with McClure's observation, saying: "I would agree that there was a common concern among us about the values of protecting and preserving the natural world." When I asked Gary Snyder whether he felt the event exemplified a interest in nature among the Beat poets, he said: "If by interest you mean one who backpacks, climbs, does forest or range work, is a member of a conservation organization, is a naturalist, then Rexroth and I were the only ones. But if you mean a sensibility open to nature, tuned to the landscape, then Philip Whalen is

certainly included. Michael McClure's interest was that of the naturalist and conservationist. Allen [Ginsberg] and Jack [Kerouac] and Lawrence [Ferlinghetti] were still developing a nature sensibility."

[13] McClure's references here require clarification. He writes: "The slaughter of the whales was a murder that I thought only Goya could have portrayed in his *Horrors of War*. I called on D.H. Lawrence at the end to be the tutelary figure of the poem because of his description of the copulation of whales [in *Whales Weep Not*] and his imagining of the angels moving from body to body in the mammoth act." (*Scratching the Beat Surface* 33)

[14] The original title of Ginsberg's "Howl" had, in fact, been "Yawp," a title taken from Whitman's line in "Song of Myself": "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roof of the world."

[15] *Kerouac West Coast: A Bohemian Pilot Detailed Navigation Instructions*. N. pag.

[16] I believe Snyder is mistaken about this date, as are several other literary historians. The most reliable documentation for what I believe to be the correct date of the reading--Oct. 7, 1955--comes from the letters of Allen Ginsberg. Since so much attention was given to his first reading of "Howl," a great deal of dated material (i.e. letters, telegrams) was generated in the reading's aftermath which point to this as the correct date.

II. "THIS IS OUR BODY": GARY SNYDER'S EROTIC UNIVERSE

"Sweet, sane, still Nakedness in Nature!--ah if poor, sick, prurient humanity in cities might really know you once more! Is not nakedness then indecent? No, not inherently. It is your thought, your sophistication, your fear, your respectability, that is indecent."

Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (1882)

"America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?"

Allen Ginsberg, "America" (1956)

Despite the many historical and geographical coincidences which have led readers and critics to place poet / essayist / environmentalist Gary Snyder within that loosely defined subset of postwar American writers known as the Beat Movement, the writer himself has long resisted the label of "Beat poet." While he acknowledges his role "as part of the social phenomenon" of the Beat movement, Snyder prefers to think of his poetics as sharing the esthetics of the slightly earlier San Francisco renaissance (Lauridsen and Dalgard 68). As he recently told an interviewer: "As a poet I belong to the San Francisco renaissance, but I'm not a Beat poet, and I've never been called a Beat poet" (68). Still, it is hard to ignore the four decades of close association Snyder has had with Beat writers, and harder still to imagine the strong emphasis on nature present in so much Beat

literature had he not been there to guide it in that direction, to bring, as Thomas J. Lyon put it, "to the sub-culture itself the bright clean air of the mountains" (208).

Snyder has been a crucial catalyst to the Beat Movement for as long as it has existed. He took part in the opening salvos of the movement, as one of five readers at the legendary Six Gallery reading in 1955, with a performance which lead his friend Jack Kerouac to proclaim his fictional counterpart, Japhy Ryder, "a great new hero of American culture" (*Dharma Bums* 27). Snyder befriended Kerouac when he arrived in San Francisco, shared a rented house with him at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais, and introduced him to mountaineering in the California Sierras--a friendship chronicled in Kerouac's third novel, *The Dharma Bums* (1958).[1] In recent years, Snyder's name has more often been mentioned in conjunction with writers such as Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Edward Abbey, as one of America's preeminent nature and environmental writers; but through the years, he has also remained a close friend and associate of many writers within the Beat circle, including Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Anne Waldman, Peter Orlovsky, Joanne Kyger, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and former Reed College classmates Philip Whalen and Lew Welch.

Beyond these close personal ties to the Beat movement, however, critics have seen little to link Snyder's work to that of other Beat writers. His poetry has almost always shunned the long expansive line prevalent in so much Beat writing, exemplified by Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," Gregory Corso's "Marriage," or the free-flowing, jazz-inspired sentences of Jack Kerouac's prose. Instead, Snyder's poetic lines more often run short and are tightly controlled, reminiscent of the haiku and other far eastern forms.[2] The topics of Snyder's writings also set them apart from much Beat literature--or at least from the American public's initial conception of Beat literature. Whereas Ginsberg's "Howl," Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* depict the insane, fast-paced life of urban America, Snyder's works from the same period more often speak of isolated

wilderness experience, Native American mythology, and quiet moments of Buddhist meditation.

There are, however, some genuine esthetic and thematic links between the work of Gary Snyder and other writers more squarely situated within the Beat Movement. One of these areas which Snyder shares with Beat writers such as Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs is the unshrinking desire to depict the universe beyond the boundaries and conventions of literary "decency," and to make formerly taboo subjects--the naked, the raw, the sexual, the scatological--into subjects worthy of literary treatment. In his early study of the work of Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg, *Naked Angels*, John Tytell has described this theme of "nakedness" as a key element in what he refers to as "the Beat vision":

> Beginning in despair, the Beat vision was elevated through the shocks of experience to a realization of what was most perilous about American life. One of the images that best captures the motivating energy of this search is the nakedness that was expressed aesthetically in Jack Kerouac's idea of the writer committing himself irrevocably to the original impulses of his imagination, in Ginsberg's relentless self-exposure in a poem like "Kaddish," in Burroughs' relentless refusal in *Naked Lunch* to disguise the demonic aspects of his addiction. But for the Beats nakedness did not exist simply as an aesthetic standard, it was to become a symbolic public and private stance, making art and action inseparable: thus Allen Ginsberg disrobed at poetry readings, and Kerouac once wrote that he wanted to be like the medieval Tibetan scholar-monk Milarepa who lived naked in caves. . . . This emphasis on baring the body and exposing the soul was an intuitive reaction to a betrayal the Beats felt because of mass acceptance of demeaning changes in the American ideal of self-determination. Nakedness signified rebirth, the recovery of an identity. (4)

Kerouac's fictionalized version of Gary Snyder, Japhy Ryder, is the supreme example of this "emphasis on baring the body and exposing the soul" which Tytell finds so central to the Beat vision. Japhy, the hero of *Dharma Bums*, seems almost entirely without inhibition when it comes to the human body and sexuality--either in his life or in his writing. Kerouac portrays him disrobing frequently and unashamedly--at parties, while enjoying the ancient Tibetan sexual rite of yabyum, even while on a mountain climbing expedition in the California Sierras. Japhy's poetry, too, possesses an openness towards sexuality, an openness which in Kerouac's view, elevates the formerly obscene to a level of artistic purity--as it does when Japhy Ryder shares his poetry at the "Gallery Six" reading:

> Japhy himself read his fine poems about Coyote the God of the North American Plateau Indians . . . "Fuck you! sang Coyote, and ran away!" read Japhy to the distinguished audience, making them all howl with joy, it was so pure, fuck being a dirty word that comes out clean. (13-14)[3]

Not surprisingly, in his own literary career, Gary Snyder shares this same "emphasis on baring the body and exposing the soul" exhibited by Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and other Beat writers, and brings it to what would seem to be the most unlikely of genres: nature writing.[4] With the advent of Snyder's work in the late fifties and early sixties, an area of American literature which had been in this century dominated by the genteel voices of writers such as Aldo Leopold, Robert Frost, and Rachel Carson, now found itself exposed to a new voice--one which reveled in the sexual aspects of nature (both human and non-human), took pleasure in the bawdy words and actions of humans apart from society, and boldly and honestly discussed human sexuality. It can be truthfully said, as Thomas Lyon has noted, that Snyder brought to the subculture "the bright clean air of the mountains"; but it is equally true that he brought to the mountains, and to his description of them, the sub-culture's openness towards the body and sexuality.

The attitude of openness towards sexuality expressed by Snyder and other Beat writers can not really be seen as new in American literature, of course. Walt Whitman had

opened the door to a frank poetic treatment of the human body and sexuality a century before, in poems such as "Song of Myself," and "I Sing the Body Electric." But it was a door which, for one reason or another, few writers were willing to enter until the Beat Movement reawakened this vibrant, yet dormant, strain of American writing.

Beat writers bravely took on Whitman's mission of restoring the body's place in literature, but they did so at no small personal and social cost. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* met with a barrage of controversy on the occasion of its publication, and the book's publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, quickly found himself embroiled in a lawsuit over the book's alleged obscenity. A similar fate awaited William Burroughs, when his 1959 novel *Naked Lunch* also faced trial due to obscenity charges. A decade after the *Howl* case, Michael McClure's experimental play, *The Beard*, became the target of yet another censorship trial. On several different literary fronts--poetry, fiction, and theatre--Beat writers challenged the existing standards, and in each case won court victories which helped to make the frank discussion of sexuality and other formerly taboo subjects in American literature possible.[5]

The challenges facing Gary Snyder's work were not legal, but cultural, as he attempted to broaden and liberalize the boundaries of that most genteel of American literary genres--writing about nature.[6] In the first half of the twentieth century, nature writing had come to be exemplified by works in which the natural world had been "cleansed" of much of its sexuality: the natural history essays of John Burroughs, John Muir, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, the agricultural essays of Liberty Hyde Bailey, and the poetry of Robert Frost and Theodore Roethke. There were of course exceptions, moments when the genre momentarily granted a look into the sexual aspects of nature, such as Joseph Wood Krutch's essay on the mating habits of desert plants and animals, "Love in the Desert," or moments when popular fiction brought human sexuality briefly into a natural setting, such as Ernest Hemingway's short stories "Up in Michigan" and "Fathers and Sons." But in general, American nature writing before 1950 remained a remarkably chaste and asexual

institution--an institution which as Snyder has noted recently, "was much captured by 'gentility'." [7]

Despite the radical departure from the norms of twentieth century American nature writing which Snyder's work represents, critics have been slow to acknowledge the connection between sexuality and nature in his poetry. Thomas Parkinson, in an early essay, "The Poetry of Gary Snyder," notes that among the distinctive traits of a Gary Snyder poem are "a natural (preferably wilderness setting)" along with "erotic overtones" (618). Bob Steuding, in his groundbreaking study, *Gary Snyder*, has placed the poet's erotic verse in the tradition of D.H. Lawrence because of the sensual emphasis present in the work of both writers (147).[8] While Steuding does suggest briefly that there are connections in Snyder's poems "between body and land, between love and the cycle of nature" (149), these connections remain unexplored in the critic's survey of the poet's work.

Of all of Snyder's early critics, Sherman Paul ventured furthest in his examination of some of the erotic elements in the poet's work up to, and including, his 1970 collection, *Regarding Wave*. In his 1970 essay surveying the first ten years of the poet's career, "From Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder," Paul points out, among other things, the development of what he calls Snyder's "love ethic" in its various manifestations: love in friendship, love in marriage, and love of "nature as woman" (4, 82). Paul's discussion of the theme of love in Snyder's poetry is enlightening and suggestive of further study, but it makes up only a small part of this now quite dated overview of Snyder's writing.

What is suggested, but remains unexplored, in these earlier critical treatments of Snyder's work, is a connection between what may well comprise the two most important aspects of the writer's thought: nature and the erotic.[9] That they often occur in the same poetic line in much of Snyder's work has been well documented, but the question of how

nudity and eroticism function in Snyder's writing--particularly in his writing about nature--has never been adequately addressed.

"*Know* Nature"

In the very first paragraph of the preface to his 1992 volume of collected poems, *No Nature*, Gary Snyder asks a question which is pivotal to many of the hundreds of poems which follow it:

> What's intimate? The feet and hands, one's confection of thoughts, knowledges and memories; the kitchen and the bedding. And there is one's language. How wonderful to be born to become a Native Speaker, to be truly native of something. I've been at home with the same language--eased by it, amused by it, surfing on it, no matter where I lived, through the years. (v)

The intimacy which the poet speaks of here goes much farther than the intimacy shared among humans, although this is certainly a large part of it; for Snyder, the concept of intimacy--of what it means "to be truly native of something"--extends far beyond the human realm and has as its goal a kind of universal intimacy with the whole of nature. But the realization of such an intimacy, in Snyder's view, is difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, to attain:

> But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfil our conceptions and theoretical models. There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open and conditional. (v)

As Snyder notes in his preface, much of his life's work as a poet has been to "*know* nature" on an intimate level as "An open space to move in, with the whole body, the whole mind. My gesture has been with language" (v). This admittedly impossible quest for a universal intimacy with nature in all its myriad facets lies at the root of much of the poet's

work, and at the root of many of the "obscene" or erotic elements of Snyder's poetry. The naked, the raw, the sexual, and the scatological elements in Snyder's language take many forms, from the bawdy joke to the sacred chant, and serve just as many functions--from capturing accurately the language of the logging camp to providing a far-reaching social critique of America's relationship with wilderness--but each has as its final goal the desire for an intimacy, for a oneness with nature.

"This Is Our Body"

In Allen Ginsberg's 1956 poem, "America," he asks "America when will you be angelic? / When will you take off your clothes?" (*Howl* 31). Reversing the ages-old Western tradition which viewed nudity as unnatural and immoral, and making the unclothed human form "angelic" instead of obscene was a shared concern among several of the Beat writers, including Gary Snyder. A number of Snyder's poems have as their purpose the reintroduction of humanity to its own corporal body--a mission to view the human body as a part of nature's beauty which had been left largely untended since Whitman's day. A passage from his "Lookout's Journal" dated 6 August 1952, makes it clear that a young Gary Snyder was considering such ideas even in his pre-Beat days. Writing from his perch atop a fire lookout tower in the Mt. Baker National Forest, he notes:

> What happens all winter; the wind driving snow; clouds--
> wind, and mountains--repeating
>
> this is what always happens here,
>
> and the photograph of a young female torso hung in the lookout window, in the foreground. Natural against natural, beauty. (*Earth House Hold* 7)

Snyder's most famous poem in this vein is "The Bath" from his Pulitzer Prize winning 1969 collection *Turtle Island*. The long poem is a celebration of the human body in all of its forms and stages of development. Set in a sauna where Snyder bathes nude with his wife and two sons, the poem begins with a detailed description of the poet bathing his young son:

He stands in warm water
Soap all over the smooth of his thigh and stomach
"Gary don't soap my hair!"
--his eye-sting fear--
the soapy hand feeling
through and around the globes and curves of his body
up in the crotch,
And washing-tickling out the scrotum, little anus,
his penis curving up and getting hard
as I pull back skin and try to wash it
Laughing and jumping, flinging arms around,
I squat all naked too,
is this our body? (*Turtle Island* 12)

The poem is at once both utterly wholesome and openly sexual, as the poet's description of the simple act of bathing a child becomes a joyful reminder of humanity's innately sensual nature. The stanza's final line, "*is this our body?*," perhaps the questioning voice of the poet's son, might just as easily speak for a nation grown ashamed of, and detached from, its own physical nature.

While "The Bath" contains elements of the erotic, such as Snyder's description of his wife Masa's nude body as he bathes her, the poem's over-riding tone is not sexual, but sacred. Even in the poem's most erotically charged moments, the human body is not

displayed to titillate the reader's prurient interest, but instead to instill a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of the human form:

> The body of my lady, the winding valley spine,
>
> the space between the thighs I reach through,
>
> cup her curving vulva arch and hold it from behind,
>
> a soapy tickle a hand of grail
>
> The gates of Awe
>
> That open back a turning double-mirror world of
>
> wombs in wombs, in rings,
>
> that start in music,
>
> *is this our body?* (12-13)

In his 1953 journal notes from his time on Sourdough Mountain Lookout, published in *Earth House Hold*, Snyder commented on the American public's narrow but all-consuming fascination with sex and romantic love:

> In a culture where aesthetic experience is denied and atrophied, genuine religious ecstasy rare, intellectual pleasure scorned--it is only natural that sex should become the only personal epiphany of most people & the culture's interest in romantic love take on staggering size. (19)

What is celebrated, in poems such as "The Bath," is not merely sex and romantic attraction, but a host of other even more elusive and mysterious issues: among them familial (and tribal) love, reproduction, birth, and gender. Snyder's sauna becomes the nexus for all of the poet's ruminations concerning what Whitman had referred to a century before as "the procreant urge," the mysterious physical forces which drive all species towards the next generation of offspring:

> Kai's little scrotum up close to his groin,
>
> the seed still tucked away, that moved from us to him
>
> In flows that lifted with the same joys forces

as his nursing Masa later,

playing with her breast,

Or me within her,

Or him emerging,

this is our body: (13)

The elemental and stark setting of the steam-bath allows Snyder to depict the human body stripped of all its societal trappings, as beautiful and as much a part of the natural world as any other creature "Laughing on the Great Earth":

The cloud across the sky. The windy pines.

the trickle gurgle in the swampy meadow

this is our body.

Fire inside and boiling water on the stove

We sigh and slide ourselves down from the benches

wrap the babies, step outside,

black night & all the stars. (14)

"The Vernacular of the Rowdy Working Class"

Snyder's Humor as Cultural Critique

Not all of Snyder's poetry takes the same high-minded path towards re-establishing the human body as a part of nature that we see in "The Bath," of course. The poet's writing is well known for its wry, earthy tone, and a good many of Snyder's most effective poems use elements of humor to get their point across. In some cases, such as in the small prose entries in *Earth House Hold* and poems in *Myths & Texts*, Snyder makes use of what many readers would see as "raunchy" material in order to deal more honestly and openly

with human sexuality. In place of poetic diction, Snyder often relies on what he calls "the vernacular of the rowdy working class"[10] to break down the barriers preventing a frank discussion of sexuality and the human body, such as in this Sourdough journal entry from *Earth House Hold*:

> --And then there was this young married couple, who stay locked in their room four weeks--when friends finally break in all they find is two assholes jumping back and forth through each other. " " " (14) [11]

The passage is decidedly raunchy--and Snyder no doubt knows a funny story when he hears one--but within the outrageous humor is an image suggestive of Snyder's journal entry concerning a misguided American culture in which "aesthetic experience is denied and atrophied, genuine religious ecstasy rare, [and] intellectual pleasure [is] scorned" and where sex and romantic love "take on a staggering size" (19). Although humorous, Snyder's honeymoon couple anecdote drives home the same point. The anecdote's "two assholes jumping back and forth through each other" are worn down by their own over-indulgence in sex and romance--a comic version of the same aesthetic atrophy which Snyder speaks of in his journal entry.

This humorous cultural critique of prevailing American attitudes towards sexuality--a mindset which lusts after romantic sexuality while at the same time denying the human body as a part of nature--is also at the heart of several of Snyder's later poems, such as "No Shirt No Shoes No Service" from his 1986 collection *Left Out in the Rain*. The first stanza reads:

> Padding down the street, the
> Bushmen, the Piaute, the Cintas Largas
> are refused.
> The queens of Crete,
> The waiting-ladies of the King of Bundelkhand.
> Tara is kept out,

Bare-breasted on her lotus throne. (125)

Here, the widely held and displayed American standard for proper attire in the public marketplace, "No Shirt No Shoes No Service," is held up to a more universal standard of what constitutes acceptable dress, as Snyder assembles a diverse and prestigious catalogue of those excluded by such a narrow view of the human body's "decency."[12] Not only is such a mandate laughably repressed, Snyder points out, it is also laughably futile; for in the poet's view, the human body is a fact of nature which the comparatively brief Western epoch cannot and will not deny for long. The poem concludes:

And the soils of the region will be fertile again
After another round of volcanoes
Nutrient ash--
Shiva's dancing feet [13]
(No shoes) (125)

In poems like this one, nudity becomes one of the "old ways"--a means of reconnection with earlier, more primitive cultures which demonstrated a greater harmony with the natural world. By stripping away clothing--as well as the Western social codes which enforce its use--Snyder brings himself closer to the intimacy with nature experienced by earlier human cultures who knew their surrounding landscapes as true "inhabitants."[14] In poems such as "By Frasier Creek Falls" from *Turtle Island*, the prospect of nudity becomes a key to reinhabiting the natural world:

The living flowing land
is all there is, forever

We *are* it
it sings through us--

We could live on this Earth

without clothes or tools! (41)

"Nature is Just Naturally Sexy": Snyder's Eroticized landscape

Snyder's efforts to "know Nature" on an intimate level often involve far more than simply bringing the nude human figure into the poetic landscape. Just as often, the poet imbues the natural world with an all-encompassing sensuality, thereby creating an atmosphere in which all of nature--plants, animals, and entire food chains--resound with sexual energy. But, perhaps to suggest that the poet "imbues" nature with an overwhelming sexual energy is a misreading of Snyder's intent. For rather than creating a sensual landscape, Snyder might argue that he is merely recognizing a pre-existing sexuality inherent in nature. As he told me in a recent interview: "For me I guess nature is just naturally sexy." [15]

A prime example is Snyder's often anthologized poem "Song of the Taste" from his collection *Regarding Wave* (1970). Here, as James McClintock points out, the scientific notion of the food chain, usually depicted as one of nature's most harsh realities, is portrayed as a sensual exchange of vital energies which "culminates with acts of love and promises of fecundity" (116): [16]

Eating the living germs of grasses
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed
around the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and thighs of
soft-voiced cows
the bounce of the lamb's leap

the swish of the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll
inside the soil

Drawing on life of living
clustered points of light spun
out of space
hidden in the grape.

Eating each other's seed
eating
ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread:
lip to lip. (*Regarding Wave* 17)

In other cases, Snyder creates a feminized landscape which takes on the outward appearance of the female body. [17] Just as in "The Bath" the poet describes "the winding valley spine" of his wife--using landscape features to describe the female form--in poems such as "Beneath My Hand and Eye the Distant Hills, Your Body," from *The Back Country* (1968), Snyder uses the female form to describe the surrounding terrain. The poem captures the perfect coming together of the human form and landscape, as Snyder's hands explore "the swimming limits" of his lover's body while his eyes focus on the corresponding features of the distant Uintah Mountains:

What my hand follows on your body
Is the line. A stream of love
of heat, of light, what my

eye lascivious

licks

over, watching

far snow-dappled Uintah mountains

Is that stream.

Of power. what my

hand curves over, following the line.

"hip" and "groin"

Where "I"

follow by hand and eye

the swimming limits of your body. (123)

In a slightly later poem, "Song of the Tangle," from *Regarding Wave* (1970), Snyder invests the landscape he views around him with an aura of feminine sexuality, as he makes love with his wife during a yabyum ritual outside a remote Japanese temple. Although yabyum--an ancient Tibetian sexual ritual involving prolonged intercourse while in a sitting position--is the occasion for the poem, it is the landscape surrounding the couple which provides the poems sexual imagery and energy.[18] Aside from Snyder's indirect reference to the couple's activity--"we sit all folded"--in the second stanza, the only clue to the poem's subject matter comes from the poet's description of a feminized and erotically charged landscape--a landscape which mirrors the poem's human sexuality:

Two thigh hills hold us at the fork

round mount center

we all sit folded

on the dusty planed planks of a shrine

drinking top class sake that was left

for the god.

calm tree halls

the sun past the summit

heat sunk through the vines,

twisted sasa

cicada singing,

swirling in the tangle

the tangle of the thigh

the brush

through which we push (*Regarding Wave* 14)

"She is Sacred Territory"

In the Service of the Magna Mater

In both "Song of the Tangle" and "Beneath My Hand and Eye the Distant Hills, Your Body," there is a very real sense that the poet has achieved a simultaneous intimacy with both his lover and the landscape. In Snyder's case, such thoughts are not merely flights of poetic imagination, but the basis for a new and closer relationship with the natural world. To really "know" nature (in the Biblical sense of the word) as one would know a lover, implies a tender and complex relationship with one's environment--a relationship involving respect, affection, and an almost instinctive desire to protect the object of one's love and affection from harm.

Throughout his career as a poet, Snyder has often referred to nature by using a number of female terms--sometimes as Gaia, sometimes as Mother Earth, and often as simply "she." In his most popular collection, *Turtle Island* (1974) Snyder presents his clearest and most unified depiction of a feminized natural world. In the prose pieces

which make up the book's afterword, "Plain Talk," Snyder makes it clear that "Turtle Island," the Native American term which he suggests as an alternative to the European term "America," is indeed female:

> She is sacred territory. To hear her voice is to give up the European word "America" and accept the new-old name for the continent, "Turtle Island." (104-105)

Later in the same volume, in his essay "The Wilderness," Snyder states that "the voice that speaks to me as a poet, what Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Mater. I regard that voice as a very real entity" (107). As Ed Folsom has suggested in his excellent essay "Gary Snyder's Descent to Turtle Island," a central theme of *Turtle Island* is the loving protection of a feminized wilderness: "Snyder," writes Folsom, "is the protecting voice of the continental She, who, because of mistreatment by Euro-Americans, is in danger of death. . . . 'She' is Turtle Island, and she has been raped and ravaged by the American 'He'; his appendages still push into her last wilderness and continue the assault" (224).

The death of the "continental She" to whom Folsom alludes can come in many forms. Snyder often makes use of the metaphor of cancer in describing unchecked human intrusion upon nature. Not surprisingly, he chooses to describe the strip-mining of coal on Indian lands as breast cancer: "The cancer is eating away at the breast of Mother Earth in the form of strip-mining" (*Turtle Island* 104). The breast cancer image is applied in the opening stanza of "Front Lines" as well, a poem which condemns rapid and wasteful land development:

> The edge of a cancer
> Swells against the hill--we feel
> a foul breeze--
> And it sinks back down.
> The deer winter here

A chainsaw growls in the gorge. (*Turtle Island* 18)

As the poem continues, the form of the "cancer" is made clear. The unwelcomed weekend intrusion of real estate speculators and land developers into Snyder's home region presages acts of rape and other violence upon the landscape:

Sunday the 4-wheel jeep of the
Realty Company brings in
Landseekers, lookers, they say
To the land,
Spread your legs.
.....
A bulldozer grinding and slobbering
Sideslipping and belching on top of
The skinned-up bodies of still-live bushes
In the pay of a man
From town. (18)

Snyder is well aware of the power which such images of violence against women possess. If, for Snyder's readers, the equation suggests that nature equals woman, then violence against nature in some way corresponds to violence against women--and thereby gains the force of a powerful social taboo. Bulldozing trees in the name of "progress" will hardly rattle the American ethos--but the bulldozing of mothers, daughters, and sisters clearly will. But "Front Lines," like many of the poems within *Turtle Island*, and like many Snyder has written in the twenty years since it publication, does far more than simply decry American acts of violence against "Mother Earth." The poem's concluding lines, "And here we must draw / Our line" (18), are resolute in their determination to dig in and defend the "Magna Mater" against the opponents of wilderness at all costs. Snyder's "Mother Earth" is the source of much more than mere sympathy for the environmentalist

cause; she is also the wellspring of its joyous determination, as he demonstrates in the final stanza of the poem, "Tomorrow's Song":

At work and in our place:

in the service
of the wilderness
of life
of death
of the Mother's breasts! (*Turtle Island* 77)

"Naked Comfort, Scant Fear"

The ongoing quest for an intimacy, a oneness, with nature continues to be a central focus of Gary Snyder's poetry as he enters his mid sixties. And a major component of this quest to "know Nature" continues to be the reintroduction of the human body into an eroticized poetic landscape, as the poet strives to broaden the boundaries of American nature writing to include elements of the sensual and the erotic. A poem from his most recent collection *No Nature*, entitled "The Sweat," makes clear that though the poet may be aging, his interest in portraying the unclothed human form as a part of the natural world remains unflagging.

Set in a steam bath in an island off the Alaskan coast, which Snyder shares with several middle aged women, "The Sweat" is a joyous revisitation of the situation, and many of the same themes, presented in Snyder's earlier poem "The Bath" from *Turtle Island.* The decades which separate the two poems have a profound impact on the speaker's point of view. Whereas in "The Bath" Snyder has considered the mysteries associated with his youth--among them sexuality, birth, and family--his later poem "The Sweat" examines many of the same themes but from the perspective of middle age. As the poet sits naked in the steaming sauna, "socks and glasses tucked into my moccasins, / Wearing only

earrings and a faded tattoo--" he marvels at the physical aspects of the women who accompany him:

> The women speak of birth at home.
> Of their children, their breasts hang
> Softer, the nipples darker,
> Eyes clear and warm.
> Naked. Legs up, we have all raised children
>
> I could love each one,
> Their ease, their opened--sweet--
> older--still youthful--
> womanly being bodies-- (364)

This loving attention to the physical beauty of his female friends is paired equally, however, with Snyder's tribute to the womens' intellects. If Snyder's poem "The Bath" was an exploration of the sensual aspects of one's youth, then perhaps "The Sweat" could be viewed as an exploration of both the sensual--and cerebral--pleasures to be enjoyed in life's second half. As the poet and his companions finish their sauna and gather, still naked, on the beach to talk, he turns his attention away from the merely physical, and begins to focus on the mind as well as the body:

> And outside, naked, cooling on the deck
> Midsummer's far northern soft dusk eve,
> Bare skin to the wind;
>
> Older is smarter and more tasty.
> Minds tough and funny--many lovers--
> At the end of days of talking
> Science, writing, values, spirit, politics, poems--

Different shoes and shirts,
In little heaps--sit naked, silent, gaze
On chests, and breasts and knees and knobby feet
in the tide smell, on the bleached deck planks,
Like seals hauled out for sunning, (365)

Freed from the urgent and ever-present sexuality evidenced in "The Bath" and other early works, "The Sweat" achieves a level of comfort with the human body which is unparalleled among Snyder's poems. The nude figures relaxing on the beach are as comfortable with themselves as "seals hauled out for sunning," as much a part of the landscape as the smell of the ocean tide or the "bleached deck planks." Oblivious to their own nudity, the groups' conversation revolves around their studies, their careers, and their relationships:

Crinkles by the eyes,
Limber legs crossed,
Single mothers--past parenting--
Back to college--running a business--
Checking salmon for the Fish & Game,
Writing a play, an article, a novel,
Waitressing and teaching,
In between men friends, teen-aged son--
Doing a dissertation on the Humpbacked Whales,
Doing tough-assed poems-- (365)

The introduction of the groups' daily concerns into what for many would be an erotically charged situation (Snyder himself acknowledges his sexual attraction for the women), underscores the ease and comfort with which the group disrobes; they are comfortable with this intimate conversation *because* they are naked, Snyder shows us, not

in spite of it. The poem ends with Snyder rejoicing in his own nudity, as he happily and fearlessly claims his own place in the world. As his poetry has done for more than four decades, Gary Snyder's "The Sweat" fuses the natural world and the naked human form, joining them together so seamlessly as to make us wonder how the two elements were ever put asunder.

Naked comfort, scant fear,
Strong soul, naught to hide,

This life:
We get old enough and finally really like it!
Meeting and sweating
At a breezy beach. (*No Nature* 365)

NOTES

[1] Snyder also plays a role in Kerouac's 1962 California novel, *Big Sur*, under the pseudonym of "Jarry Wagner."

[2] There are some exceptions, such as Snyder's early poems, "Cartegena" and "T-2 Tanker Blues" (both included in *Riprap* 1959), in which he experiments with the long, open line, characteristic of Whitman and Ginsberg.

[3] The poem Japhy Ryder reads from here is Snyder's "A Berry Feast" from *The Back Country* (1968). Snyder has said, on several occasions, that although fictionalized, Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* presents an essentially accurate depiction of both the characters and events of the period.

[4] This very broad term requires definition. As Thomas J. Lyon points out in "A Taxonomy of Nature Writing," in *This Incomperable Lande*, what I will refer to as the genre of "nature writing" has three main dimensions: "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (3). Clearly, Snyder's work fits nicely into each of these dimensions. "The fundamental goal of the genre," Lyon notes, "is to turn our attention outward to the activity of nature" (7).

[5] For a more complete discussion of Beat censorship trials, see Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Jacob Ehrlich's *Howl of the Censor*, which includes excerpts of court transcripts from the *Howl* trial. The 1966 Grove Press edition of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* includes the valuable preface "*Naked Lunch* on Trial," which includes a brief history of the case as well as some key excerpts from the trial's testimony. Lee Bartlett's interview with Michael McClure, "Writing *The Beard*," included in McClure's collection, *Lighting the Corners: On Art, Nature, and the Visionary*, provides background on the censorship challenges faced in the play's early productions.

[6] In a 1994 interview with me, Snyder argued that the fact that his work escaped the attention of censorship challenges, while that of his peers did not, is due to the lesser

degree of "objectionable" material in his poetry: "There's a good reason why my work has never been subjected to legal challenges: it is simply not as shocking, nor does it push the bounds of decency, anywhere near as far as does that of Burroughs, Ginsberg, or McClure." See Appendix B.

[7] Mail interview. See Appendix B.

[8] In a mail interview with me in September 1994, Snyder acknowledged his reading of D.H. Lawrence as one of the sources for his erotic view of nature, while at the same time, surprisingly, disavowing the influence of Walt Whitman: "As for the eros I bring to nature, I guess I must have gotten a push in that direction from Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, but I doubt much came from Whitman." See Appendix B.

[9] The word "erotic" may be too limited for the scope of my examination of Snyder's writing. I mean it to include not only the sexually erotic, but also the raw, the scatological, and what had generally been accepted as "obscene" the American literary establishment of the 1950's and 60's.

[10] Mail interview. See Appendix B.

[11] The extra quotation marks at the end of this anecdote may indicate that it was an often-told story among the Forest Service crews Snyder worked with.

[12] Snyder engages in this type of cross-cultural examination of attitudes towards nudity elsewhere as well. See his poem "The Public Bath" in *The Back Country* (41-42) concerning Japanese attitudes towards nudity. See also "A Journey to Rishikesh & Hardwar" in *Earth House Hold* for Snyder's description of East Indian attitudes towards nudity: 83-89.

[13] Shiva: the Hindu god of destruction and reproduction, usually depicted as a scantily clad and barefoot goddess.

[14] Snyder uses this term in his essay "Re-inhabitation" in *The Old Ways*, 58.

[15] See Appendix B.

[16] Similarly, Snyder has written about hunting as a loving exchange between predator and prey. See the section entitled "Making Love With Animals" in his essay "Poetry and the Primative: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique," collected in *Earth House Hold* (117-30).

[17] Snyder's colleague, the California poet William Everson (Brother Antoninus), has written of a similar impulse to view the landscape in terms of the female form. See his essay "Landscape and Eros" in *Birth of a Poet: The Santa Cruz Meditations*: 171-80.

[18] See chapter 5 of Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*.

III. KEROUAC'S "VIRTUOUS DESERT": THE ROLE OF NATURE IN *THE DHARMA BUMS*

"[M]y companion and I, for I sometimes have a companion, take pleasure in fancying ourselves knights of a new, or rather an old, order,--not Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or Riders, but Walkers, a still more ancient and honorable class, I trust. The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into, the Walker,--not the Knight, but Walker, Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People."

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1851)

As the jacket notes from the current Signet edition of Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, indicate, the fast paced, jazz and drug inspired action of his 1957 triumph *On The Road* casts a long shadow on the writer's subsequent works:

> [B]y the man who launched the hippie world, the daddy of the swinging psychedelic generation, JACK KEROUAC author of ON THE ROAD . . .
>
> Here are the orgiastic sexual sprees, the cool jazz bouts, the poetry love-ins, and the marathon binges of the kids who are hooked on Sensation and looking for the high --THE DHARMA BUMS

Too often, readers of Kerouac's fiction--from high school freshmen to established critics--have viewed his later novels as mere footnotes to a single great work: echoes of the now familiar (and often sensationalized) Beat generation mentality which drove Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty to crisscross the continent, in an attempt to escape or subvert what

they saw as a false and restrictive American society through drugs and alcohol, fast cars and free love.

Such a reading of Kerouac's fiction is a tremendous oversimplification; there is much more to Jack Kerouac than meets the eyes of those readers who only venture as far as *On The Road* will take them. The "Delouz Legend," as Kerouac came to call the body of fiction which chronicled his real life experiences, contains a variety of responses to American life which have gone unnoticed by critics because of their overemphasis on the author's role as progenitor of the "psychedelic generation." One such area long neglected by critical attention is Kerouac's extensive treatment of the subject of nature in such works as *Lonesome Traveler* (1960), *Desolation Angels* (1965), and most importantly, *The Dharma Bums* (1958).

Each of these works deal, at least in part, with the period in the mid 1950's when Kerouac was most concerned with the natural world. Kerouac's slim volume of travel sketches and essays, *Lonesome Traveler*, contains his beautifully detailed portrait of his job as a brakeman on California's railroads in the early fifties, "The Railroad Earth," a sketch filled with glowing descriptions of the California countryside. The collection also contains his sketch "Alone on a Mountaintop," which details the author's daily existence as a fire tower lookout in the Washington Cascade Range during the summer of 1956. The opening chapters of *Desolation Angels* deal fictionally with the same period, and contain a number of wildly beautiful, sublime descriptions of the mountain landscape written in the long, flowing, jazz-like cadences that readers of *On The Road* would recognize as Kerouac's characteristic spontaneous prose style.

But it is in Kerouac's earlier *Dharma Bums* that the writer's talents in describing the landscape are most fully realized, and it is in this novel that his attitudes towards nature are best articulated; more importantly, perhaps more than any other novel of the period, Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* prefigures the awakening ecological consciousness of 1960's America. Just as *On The Road* and the earlier *The Town and the City* (1950) established

him as the forerunner of counterculture Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, *Dharma Bums* establishes Kerouac in a much older tradition of writers who had looked to the natural world for the raw material of the their art. It is fitting that Kerouac be recognized for helping to establish a new and truly different literary direction by fostering the Beat movement. But it is equally fitting that he be placed among other American writers, in a tradition spanning from Henry David Thoreau up through Gary Snyder, who have concerned themselves with finding meaning in nature.

Kerouac's broad reading of earlier writers who dealt with the natural world has been well documented. His biographer, Ann Charters, notes a lifelong fascination with the dean of American nature writers, Henry David Thoreau. Kerouac was well versed in the earlier writer's work, and returned to it often throughout his life; but the author's high regard for his predecessor went beyond a simple admiration for Thoreau's writing. Often in conversation Kerouac voiced a desire to emulate the earlier writer's experiment at Walden Pond (Charters 21, 200-201). Such an identification with Thoreau's life and work is understandable--especially given the surface similarities between the lives of the two authors. Both men were of French-Canadian descent (although Kerouac's ethnicity was much more pronounced than Thoreau's), and more importantly, the two shared the same home region. Kerouac was born hearing what he later referred to as the "roars of Merrimac" (*Dr. Sax* 17). His home town, Lowell, Massachusetts, is less than twenty miles from Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, and one hears in Kerouac's Lowell novels (*Dr. Sax*, *Visions of Gerard*, and *Maggie Cassidy*) the echoes of many familiar places described in Thoreau's work.

In the introductory vitae which serves as the preface to his 1960 collection of travel sketches, *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac further identifies himself with a tradition of American literature which, like Thoreau, suggests a closer link to nature: that of the hobo or traveling adventurer.[1] In a list of his life's most important events, he reports that he ". . . read [the] life of Jack London at 18 and decided to also be an adventurer, a lonesome

traveler" (v). Later in an essay in the same collection, entitled "The Vanishing American Hobo," in an effort to lend dignity to what he sees as the American hobo's "idealistic lope to freedom" (172), Kerouac recalls other American writers whom he places in this "lonesome traveler" category:

> John Muir was a hobo who went off into the mountains with only a pocketful of dried bread, which he soaked in creeks.
>
> Did Walt Whitman terrify the children of Louisiana when he walked the open road? (174-75)

Kerouac ends his introduction to *Lonesome Traveler* with a final wish for an end to his travels on the road, and a return to a Walden of his own. He list his "final plans" as simply: "Hermitage in the woods, quiet writing of old age, mellow hopes of Paradise. . . (vi). The author was of course unaware, as he wrote these words in 1960, that his most idyllic days of "quiet writing" away from civilization were already behind him. He had come as close to realizing his Thoreauvian fantasy as he ever would during the year-long period from August 1955 to September 1956--the period chronicled by Kerouac in *Dharma Bums.*

Like many of his novels, *Dharma Bums* is a thinly veiled roman-a-clef constructed around actual people and events in Kerouac's life. Set mainly in the San Francisco area in the mid 1950's, the novel's cast of characters is a who's who of what later came to be called the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. The action of the novel centers around protagonist Ray Smith (Kerouac's fictional personae), a poet of sorts who travels West to live with his old friend Alvah Goldbook (Allen Ginsberg). Early in the novel, Smith encounters the poet / Buddhist scholar / outdoorsman Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), who quickly becomes one of the book's central figures. Playing more minor roles in the story are Beat era luminaries Warren Coughlin (Philip Whalen), Rheinhold Cacoethes (Kenneth Rexroth), Ike O'Shay (Michael McClure), Arthur Whane (Alan Watts), and Smith's old friend from his days on the road, Cody Pomeray (Neal Cassidy).

It is largely through the character of Japhy Ryder that Ray Smith is introduced to nature, and from the beginning of the novel Smith's treatment of Ryder is that of a revered teacher. Ryder is first described as "the number one Dharma Bum of them all" (10)--the term referring to one who travels the world searching for the dharma, or the ultimate truth. From the outset, Japhy is seen in terms of his outdoor heritage, "a woods boy, an axman, farmer, interested in animals and Indian lore. . . " (10). Smith's first view of Japhy is that of a city-dwelling woodsman--a type he would later refer to in *The Subterraneans* as "urban Thoreaus" (15). His visage as Smith first sees him on the street is more characteristic of a mountain climber than a college student studying Oriental languages at Berkeley:

> I saw Japhy loping along in that curious long stride of the mountain climber, with a small knapsack on his back filled with books and toothbrushes and whatnot which was his small "goin-to-the-city" knapsack as apart from his big full rucksack complete with sleeping bag, poncho, and cook-pots. . . He was wiry, suntanned, vigorous, open, all howdies and glad talk. . . (10-11)

As John Tytell has noted, Japhy Ryder seems to represent "a fulfilled version of Dean Moriarty" (170). Ryder does share a number of similarities with Kerouac's hero from *On The Road*. Both characters are energetic, exuberant, working class heros--seemingly irresistible to women and full of wonder at the possibilities that life presents. But while Dean Moriarty continually expresses a desire to become a writer and put his life into some kind of order, his restless nature won't allow him to do more than dart from one dangerous and chaotic situation to another. Japhy Ryder, in contrast, is much more serious and dedicated about his life's ambitions. He is portrayed as a diligent scholar of Eastern languages, Buddhism, and American Indian culture, a hard working writer and translator, and unlike Moriarty, a solid and dependable friend (Tytell 170-71).

Beyond these initial contrasts which Tytell suggests, however, there exists a much more fundamental difference between the two characters. By replacing Dean Moriarty

with Japhy Ryder as the central hero of his fiction, Kerouac moves away from the fast-paced, urban way of life which Moriarty represents, and embraces the much more balanced, nature-centered world of Ryder. In announcing that "Japhy Ryder is a great new hero of American culture" (28), Kerouac signals a change from the automobile to the backpack, a sharp turn off the road and onto the mountain hiking trail.

Ray Smith's attendance at a San Francisco poetry reading featuring Alvah Goldbook and Ryder provides him with his first glimpse of Japhy as a creative artist. The poems he reads, with their sources in the natural world, make a strong impression on Smith and provide the would-be poet with an inkling of the power of nature as subject matter. Although the reading described in *Dharma Bums* is actually the now famous Six Gallery reading of October 1955--the event made famous by Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl"--Kerouac chooses to underplay Alvah Goldbook's magnum opus "Wail." Noting that he found several of the evening's readers to be "either too dainty in their aestheticism, or too hysterically cynical to hope for anything, or too abstract and indoorsy" (14), Smith instead focuses at length on Ryder's unique poetry and its sources in nature, Native American and Eastern philosophy, and anarchist politics:

> And he had his tender lyrical lines, like the ones about bears eating berries, showing his love of animals, and great mystery lines about oxen on the Mongolian road showing his knowledge of Oriental literature even on to Hsuan Tsung the great Chinese monk who walked from China to Tibet, Lanchow to Kashgar and Mongolia carrying a stick of incense in his hand. Then Japhy showed his sudden barroom humor with lines about Coyote bringing goodies. And his anarchistic ideas about how Americans don't know how to live, with lines about commuters being trapped in living rooms that come from poor trees being felled by chainsaws (showing here, his background as a logger up north). His voice was deep and resonant and somehow brave, like the voice of oldtime American heroes and orators. (14)[2]

As Japhy befriends Smith and takes him under his guidance, the two begin to plan Smith's first real encounter with the wilderness: an expedition to climb Mt. Matterhorn in the California Sierras. As the trip begins, Kerouac invokes the images of a number of "oldtime American heroes," establishing Japhy (and less directly, himself) in the lineage of great outdoorsmen and nature writers of the past. "You know old John Muir used to go up into these mountains where we're going. . ." Japhy tells Smith (30-31). As the climb progresses, Kerouac broadens his list of Japhy's models: "[H]is heroes are John Muir and Han Shan and Shih-te and Li Po and John Burroughs and Paul Bunyan and Kropotkin" (44). With this passage, Kerouac makes clear just how diverse the influences on Japhy and his view of nature have been. In addition to the two Americans on the list--writer and wilderness advocate John Muir and nature essayist John Burroughs--Kerouac cites a trio of early Chinese poets as well as Peter Kropotkin, the Russian biologist and author of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, a classic of anarchist thought. Filling out the list is Paul Bunyan, mythical lumberjack of the American forest. The forces represented by these figures--myth, science, anarchism, Buddhism and Taoism, all linked by a reverence for nature--combine to make up the burgeoning ecological consciousness displayed by Japhy Ryder.

The climb up Mt. Matterhorn continues, with Japhy, as usual, in the role of teacher and Smith as apprentice. "Japhy, I'm glad I met you," Smith tells his new companion during their morning hike, "I'm gonna learn all about how to pack rucksacks and what to do and hide in these mountains when I'm sick of civilization" (45). Impressed with Smith's willingness to hike long distances and his ready grasp of Buddhist philosophy, Ryder tells him at the end of their first long day's climb:

> There's nothing wrong with you Ray, your only trouble is you never learned to get out to spots like this, you've let the world drown you in its horseshit and you've been vexed. . . (56)

Smith apparently takes Ryder's observations to heart, and as he drifts off to sleep on his first night in the mountains he muses on the shortfalls of his life of "drinking and disappointment" removed from nature. In a crucial turning point in the novel, Smith vows to himself to follow the course offered by Japhy and "begin a new life," one in which he will "tramp with a rucksack and make it the pure way" (62). The night's sleep which follows Smith's decision is a serene one, filled with "pure cold dreams like ice water, happy dreams, no nightmares" (62).

The next morning--the day of the final assault on the Mt. Matterhorn summit--brings a sense of rebirth and rejuvenation to Smith. "I felt like I did when I was a boy and it was time to get up and go play all day Saturday, in overalls," he says. But the day which awaits Smith, Ryder, and Henry Morely[3], the third member of the climbing party, is far from Smith's initial vision of it as child's play. The final climb to the summit is an exhausting and dangerous one. Similar in tone to Thoreau's description of his experiences atop Mt. Ktaadn in *Maine Woods*, Kerouac's description of the mountain's landscape is a dark and foreboding one. As Japhy and Smith struggle towards the summit after leaving an exhausted Morely behind, Smith is struck for the first time by both the danger of his predicament and the sublimity of his surroundings:

> At every few steps it seemed we were going higher on a terrifying elevator, I gulped I turned around to look back and see all of the state of California it would seem stretching out in three directions under huge blue skies with frightening planetary space clouds and immense vistas of distant valleys. . . (65)

The "happy dreams" of the previous night's romantic vision of a life in harmony with nature are now dramatically reversed as Smith's fears keep him from gaining the summit:

> "I began to be afraid of being blown away by the wind. All the nightmares I'd ever had about falling off mountains and precipitous buildings ran through my head in perfect clarity" (66).

As darkness falls, Smith lags behind Japhy and gives up on reaching the mountain's peak. Paralyzed with fear, all he can do is cling to a level spot in the mountain face and scream "This is too high!" as his friend climbs successfully to the top.

Smith's reactions to the harsh realities of the mountain wilderness bear a striking similarity to Thoreau's on Mt. Ktaadn. Faced for the first time with the raw wilderness of Ktaadn, he felt "the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man" (645), and was forced into a critical moment of reevaluation of his place in the natural world. For Thoreau, this first real exposure to wilderness led him to question his earlier views of the natural world as false and contrived--the product of genteel museum observation rather than first-hand experience: "What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home!":

> I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,--*that* my body might,--but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!--Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *Where* are we? (646)

Similarly, Smith faces a moment of horrified anguish at the realities of nature which now face him as he cowers on the steep mountainside--a moment in which he too reevaluates humanity's role in the universe:

> I nudged myself closer into the ledge and closed my eyes and thought "Oh what a life this is, why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space," and with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." The saying made my hair

> stand on end; it had been such cute poetry sitting on Alvah's straw mats. Now it was enough to make my heart pound and my heart bleed for being born at all. (67)

In both passages the speakers move from a state of romantic innocence concerning nature to a terrified and uncomfortable vision of its reality. As the old, comforting sources for a beneficent model of nature fall away (Thoreau's museum observation, and Smith's "cute poetry"), they are replaced by the "hard matter" which now shapes their view of the world (Thoreau's "rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks!" and Smith's "huge mountains and rocks and empty space").

Nineteenth century wilderness advocate John Muir, a writer well known to Snyder, Welch and others in Beat circles (and one who is mentioned several times in Kerouac's novel), told of a similar moment of crisis in his 1894 classic *The Mountains of California*. Muir's essay "A Near View of the High Sierra" describes a dangerous predicament the author faced while mountain climbing in the same region that Kerouac and Snyder ventured into more than an half century later. Having climbed as far as he could up a steep rock face, Muir found himself trapped, "with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down" (51). "My doom appeared fixed," he wrote. "I *must* fall" (52).

But Muir's fear of death by falling passes in an instant, as an unexplainable force restores his abilities and seems to grant him a "new sense"of his own competence and well being:

> But this terrible eclipse lasted only a moment, when life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness. I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense. The other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian Angel--call it what you will--came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I

> seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete. (52)[4]

Likewise, Smith's dark and frightening view of nature is short lived, as a vision of Ryder coming back down from the mountain's summit provides the frightened climber with his own "new sense"--a moment of Zen satori or enlightenment which seems to reassure him of his abilities and the beneficence of nature:

> Then suddenly it was just like jazz: it happened in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy *running down the mountain* in huge twenty foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heels, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yelling yodelaying sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized *it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool* and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running down the mountain after him doing exactly the same huge leaps, the same fantastic runs and jumps. . . (68)

The moment is one of great importance for Smith; unsuccessful in his first try at mountain climbing, he has still learned from Japhy what he calls "the final lesson of them all, you can't fall off a mountain" (69). While he has not triumphed over the mountain, as he set out to do at the beginning of the climb, Smith has faced, and vanquished, his own fears concerning nature. "I felt really proud," Smith says of the experience a short time later, "I was a Tiger" (69).

The descriptions of nature which follow Smith's satori on Mt. Matterhorn are among the most beautiful in *Dharma Bums*. With Smith's fears behind him, the hard-edged, foreboding landscape of the morning's climb takes on an almost supernatural beauty as the climbers descend in the moonlight:

> The moonlight poured through thick foliage and made dapples on the backs of Morely and Japhy as they walked in front of me. With our packs we got into a good rhythmic walk and enjoyed going "Hup hup" as we came to switchbacks and

> swiveled around, always down, down, the pleasant downgoing swinging trail rhythm trail. And that roaring creek was a beauty by moonlight, those flashes of flying moon water, that snow white foam, those black-as-pitch trees, regular elfin paradises of shadow and moon. (72-73)

On returning home, Smith finds that his chronic phlebitis (a condition which in real life plagued Kerouac for years) was suddenly gone: "I had worked the blood clots right out of existence," Smith says, "I felt very happy" (75). The healing powers of nature manifested here point to an essential theme in *Dharma Bums*: the contrast between the unhealthy "drinking and disappointment" of life in urban America and the "new life" of health and beauty to be found in nature. Again and again, Kerouac invokes the nineteenth century Romantic imagery of the city as the place of drunkenness, sexual perversion, ill health, and insanity, while portraying the natural world as the locale of health, chastity, clear-headed and productive meditation, and sanity.

Such a dichotomy between the "evils" of the city and "virtues" of nature could hardly be called original in Kerouac's day. It is the same force which pushed Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumpbo across the prairie in the early nineteenth century, the same force which led Henry Thoreau to begin his twenty-two month experiment at Walden Pond in 1845, the same force which drove Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams to the banks of the Big Two-Hearted in the years following the First World War. But for Kerouac, this dichotomy meant much more than merely paying lip service to a time-worn Romantic convention; it represented a very real personal struggle for physical and mental health. Alcohol and other drugs such as Benzedrine and Morphene had presented a problem for Kerouac throughout much of his career--a problem which only seemed to grow worse with the sudden fame which followed the publication of *On The Road.* Written in 1957, in the midst of the author's newfound celebrity and the increased dependance on alcohol which accompanied it, *Dharma Bums* chronicles a time less than two years earlier when nature

had actually presented a healthy alternative to the heavy drinking which was beginning to take control of Kerouac's life.

Perhaps the most clear cut example of this dichotomy of good and evil represented by wilderness and urban landscapes comes in Kerouac's description of an "insane day" spent by Smith in the border town of Juarez, Mexico. Following an ecstatic night of camping alone in the remote desert outside of town, Smith stashes his pack and hikes into town. After an afternoon of "a few too many to drink" in the local taverns, Smith falls in with "a bunch of evil Mexican Apaches" for a "long evil afternoon smoking marijuana" (122-23).[5] Smith's new companions pilfer items from his bag, and one of them, a young homosexual, falls in love with Smith. Uncomfortable with the situation, he leaves, remembering the "perfect white sand gulch" of his campsite. Smith's admirer, however, follows him relentlessly through the streets of Juarez as he attempts to elude him. Finally breaking away from his pursuer at the border, a clear line between Smith's old life and the "new life" that lay before him, he leaves behind what he calls the "evil city," noting with relief that "I had my virtuous desert waiting for me" (123). As he heads back to his camp, Smith reflects on his newfound freedom and security in nature:

> I walked anxiously over the border . . . my feet making that lonely thwap thwap of Japhy's boots and I realized that I had indeed learned from Japhy how to cast off the evils of the world and the city and find my true pure soul, just as long as I had a decent pack on my back. (123)

Kerouac's presciption for physical, spiritual, and mental well being is not limited to his protagonist, however; early on in the novel it is clear that what is good for a troubled individual also the right medicine for a troubled American society. Japhy Ryder, spurred by reading Walt Whitman's lines about the role of the bard being "to cheer up slaves and horrify foreign despots," presents the beginnings of his prophetic vision of "a world full of rucksack wanderers," leading away from American consumerism and towards a happier, more ecologically centered future. Ryder envisions:

> . . . a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that stuff they really don't want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you always see a week later in the junk anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray. . . (77-78)

Passages such as this one point to an awakening ecological consciousness in Kerouac's writing, one which while in an early stage of development, still seems to be a force in the novel. Almost always, these premonitions of the ecological awareness which would follow a decade later are voiced by Japhy Ryder--the fictional counterpart of Gary Snyder. Coming as it did, a year before the publication of Snyder's first collection of poems, *Riprap*, Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* provided readers with their first encounter with many of the ideas put forth in Snyder's later work.

Many of these views come to light in the section of *Dharma Bums* dealing with a hiking trip in the Mt. Tamalpais region taken by Smith and Ryder just before Japhy is set to depart for extended study in Japan. The trip follows a wild, three day, going away party for Japhy--a party which leaves both hikers feeling spent and depressed. As usual, however, the wilderness provides the needed cure for what ails them; as they set out, Ryder comments on his feeling of relief at escaping from the party and returning to nature: "Goddammit it feels good to get away from dissipation and go in the woods" (157). Smith's remarks on leaving the revelry behind display a similar sentiment; "It was going to be a great day," he says as the two set off on their hike. "We were back in our element: trails" (157).

The trip provides a time for reflection and looking ahead for the two friends, and in their remarks there is a strong sense of prophesy--both about Kerouac and Snyder's later careers and America's changing attitudes about nature spurred by a new understanding of Eastern philosophy. "East'll meet West anyway," Japhy predicts:

> Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their backs tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody. (160)[6]

Already seeming to possess the bioregional focus of much of Snyder's later work, Japhy refers to the "Pacific coast mountain and ocean land" as "the future home of the Dharma-body" (157). Ryder is even more explicit about his tribal vision of the future, as he and Smith pause to admire the California horizon:

> Ray, by God, later in our future life we can have a fine free-wheeling tribe in these California hills, get girls and have dozens of radiant enlightened brats, live like Indians in hogans and eat berries and buds. (158)

Ryder also lays out for Smith his future plans for a body of poetry quite unlike anything which has come before it in American literature--with sources in nature, history, the sciences, Eastern thought, and ecology:

> Know what I'm gonna do? I'll do a long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains Without End' and just write it on and on on a scroll and unfold on and on with new surprises and always what went on before forgotten, see, like a river[7], or like one of them real long Chinese silk paintings that show two little men hiking in an endless landscape of gnarled old trees and mountains so high they merge with the fog in the upper silk void. I'll spend three thousand years writing it, it'll be packed full of information on soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan Tsung's travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains. (157) [8]

While Japhy's plans for his own life seem clear-cut (and surprisingly accurate when one examines the later career of Gary Snyder), he remains uncertain about the long term effects that his actions may have on society. Yet he remains optimistic about the consequences of his life's convictions, telling Smith, "I know somethin good's gonna come out of all this" (165). The "somethin good" Japhy points to is a distant goal, involving a more bio-centered view of life. He tells Ray:

> You and I ain't out to bust anybody's skull, or cut someone's throat in an economic way, we've dedicated ourselves to prayer for all sentient beings, and when we're strong enough we'll really be able to do it too, like the old saints. (165-66)

Following the hiking trip, Japhy sets sail for his long period of Buddhist study in a Japanese monastery, having arranged for Smith to take over his old job as a fire lookout in the Cascades. "As though Japhy's finger were pointing me the way," Smith begins the trip north to his new job (170). His reaction to the landscape of the Pacific Northwest as he travels up the coast is described in some of the novel's most lyrical passages, and rates, in Kerouac's own view, as some of the best writing of his career (Nicosia 564). His description of the coast near Seattle, like much of the description which makes up the final section of the book, is seen in terms of Japhy's vision--in this case a bioregional view of the Pacific coast:

> And suddenly I saw that the Northwest was a great deal more than the little vision I had of it of Japhy in my mind. It was miles and miles of unbelievable mountains grooking on all horizons in the wild broken clouds, Mount Olympus and Mount Baker, a giant orange sash in the gloom over the Pacific-ward skies that led I knew toward the Hokkaido Siberian desolations of the world. (173-74)

The description of the landscape continues in this vein, more often than not juxtaposed with Smith's recollections of his teacher Japhy: "'And this is Japhy's lake, and these are Japhy's mountains,' I thought, and wished Japhy were here to see me do everything he

wanted me to do" (180). Often, the natural world is depicted in mystical terms, as in this view of the Skagit River region:

> It was a river wonderland, the emptiness of the golden eternity, odors of moss and bark and twigs and mud, all ululating mysterious visionstuff before my eyes, tranquil and everlasting nevertheless, the hillhairing trees, the dancing sunlight. As I looked up the clouds assumed, as I assumed, faces of hermits. . . Everything was everlastingly loose and responsive, it was all everywhere beyond the truth, beyond emptyspace blue. (177)

With little to do during his time as a fire lookout, Smith finds ample time for meditation, and while the final section of the novel, with its highly personal and impressionistic qualities, is somewhat ambiguous concerning the exact nature of Smith's mystical enlightenment, it is clear that the natural world is its source. At times, Smith's enlightenment seems closely related to the Zen Buddhist concept of enlightenment through "do nothing"--the emptying of the mind in an effort to return to one's original nature: "I didn't know anything any more, I didn't care, and it didn't matter, and suddenly I felt really free," Smith says after long days meditating in the mountain landscape (188-89). But immediately following this statement, Kerouac invokes a traditional Christian symbol of salvation and regeneration as he witnesses a rainbow from his cabin window:

> What is a rainbow, Lord?
>
> A hoop
>
> For the lonely.
>
> It hooped right into Lightening Creek, rain and snow fell simultaneous, the lake was milkwhite a mile below, it was just too crazy. I went outside and suddenly my shadow was ringed by the rainbow as I walked on the hilltop, a lovely-haloed mystery making me want to pray. (189)

This struggle between Kerouac's Catholic upbringing and his strong interest and devotion to Buddhism was a internal battle which the author waged for much of his adult

life, and one which can been traced throughout his work. Attempts to reconcile the conflict between the two religious traditions are found often in Kerouac's writing--attempts which all too often failed to produce a satisfying synthesis. In a poem from the late fifties entitled "My Views on Religion," Kerouac tries to envision a theology which can account for both religions, yet a hierarchical order imposed in the final lines of the poem seems to place Buddhism above Christianity:

> Buddha is God, the Father of Jesus Christ
>
> AND GOD IS GOD (*Pomes All Sizes* 102)

Yet at other times, Kerouac depicted his devotion to Buddhism as secondary to his Christian beliefs--a phase of his search for meaning which had passed. In the opening pages of *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's protagonist Smith, recalls the period chronicled in the novel as the high point in his belief in Buddhism:

> I was very devout in those days and was practicing my devotion almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service [to Buddhism] and a little tired and cynical. . . . But then I really believed in the reality of tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world. . . (6)[9]

This tension between Buddhism and Christianity has long been noted in Kerouac's writing, but what separates Kerouac's religious vision in *Dharma Bums* from that of his other works is its source in the natural world. Whatever religious tradition Ray Smith subscribes to--the homocentric worldview offered by Christian Catholicism, the more biocentric teachings of Buddhism, or some highly individualized synthesis of the two--it is clear that the raw material for his enlightenment, as well as the symbols he chooses to describe it, come from the natural setting around Mt. Desolation. Near the end of his stay on the mountain, Smith recalls:

> Sixty sunsets had I seen revolve on that perpendicular hill. The vision of the freedom of eternity was mine forever. The chipmunk ran into the rocks and a butterfly came out. It was as simple as that. (190-91)

It seems appropriate that the final vision that Smith should have while on the mountain would be of Japhy Ryder, the teacher that made his journey possible. Facing the end of his summer job in the mountains, and the inevitable "sadness of coming back to the cities" with "all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upside down in the void" (191), Smith conjures up the image of his fellow dharma bum Japhy, a final symbol of the health, salvation, and beauty to be found in nature:

> And suddenly it seemed I saw that unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his seamed face. It wasn't the real-life Japhy of rucksacks and Buddhism studies and big mad parties at Corte Madera, it was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams, and he stood there saying nothing. "Go away, thieves of the mind!" he cried down the hollows of the unbelievable Cascades. (191)

Reassured by this vision of his mentor and friend, Smith heads down the mountain, "on down the trail back to this world" (192). Before departing, however, Smith offers a prayer to his surroundings as Japhy had taught him to do:

> And in keeping with Japhy's habit of always getting down on one knee and delivering a little prayer to the camp we left, to the one in the Sierra, and the others in Marin, and the little prayer of gratitude he had delivered to Sean's shack the day he sailed away, as I was hiking down the mountain with my pack I turned and knelt on the trail and said "Thank you, shack." Then I added "Blah," with a little grin, because I knew that shack and that mountain would understand what that meant, and turned and went on down the trail back to this world. (191-92)

As Gerald Nicosia has noted, the final seemingly nonsensical remark "Blah" offered to the landscape indicates just how personal the connection between Smith and the mountain has

become. The bond transcends language and becomes one of direct communication between man and nature (563).

Kerouac's own journey "back down the trail to this world" after the period captured in *Dharma Bums* was permanent; never again after his rapid rise to fame following the 1957 publication of *On The Road* would he venture out into the wild for any extended period of time. Gary Snyder's long absence from the U.S. while he studied in a Japanese monastery may have been a factor. Without his hiking companion and mentor present, Kerouac may simply have lost interest in the outdoors. Kerouac's biographers have noted an increased problem with alcohol on the writer's part during the months following publication of *On The Road*, a problem which may also account for this change away from the more nature-centered mode of existence described in *Dharma Bums* (Nicosia 557-58).

Kerouac's own writings suggest yet another possible reason for the author's turn away from the natural world. In his essay, "The Vanishing American Hobo," published in 1960 as the final piece in *Lonesome Traveler*, the writer talks about his own life as a traveling hobo on the "highways, railroad yards, sea shores, river bottoms, embankments and the thousand-and-one hiding holes of the industrial night" (172). The essay laments the passing of "a definite special footwalking freedom going back to the days of Jim Bridger and Johnny Appleseed," caused, according to Kerouac, by an increasingly intrusive urban society, determined to inflict itself on those who would find sanctuary in the wilderness:

> Great sinister tax-paid police cars (1960 models with humorless searchlights) are likely to bear down at any moment on the hobo in his idealistic lope to freedom and the hills of holy silence and holy privacy. (172-73)

Instead of the "rucksack revolution" which the author had prophesied in 1957's *Dharma Bums*, a revolution which he hoped would bring American youth back into nature by the thousands, the first year of the new decade is marked from Kerouac's perspective as a final closing of the frontier, and the end of wilderness as a Romantic sanctuary from the forces of urban civilization: "There's something strange going on," he notes, "you can't

even be alone any more in the primitive wilderness" (182). The author's solution is grim acceptance:

> As far as I'm concerned the only thing to do is to sit in a room and get drunk and give up your hoboing and your camping ambitions because there aint a sheriff or a fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you cook a little meal over some burning sticks in the tule break or the hidden valley or anyplace anymore because he has nothing to do but pick on what he sees out there on the landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station. (182)

The writer's final word on the subject is a bleak one; even the new state of Alaska, admitted to the union that year, is in Kerouac's view tarnished by its contact with the burgeoning police state. Kerouac's tone is one of utter resignation to his fate: "I have no ax to grind: I'm simply going to another world" (182).

The essay ends with a further reversal of the Romantic vision of the hobo's open road. Driven from their traditional haunts in the American countryside, the once-great legions of traveling hobos in the tradition of Whitman and Muir are reduced to a life of urban poverty as "the poor bum of the skid row" (183). "There he sits in the doorway, back to the wall, head down," Kerouac writes, describing this new urban variation of the hobo, who sits waiting "for the wheels of the city to roll," but still longs for "the emerald mountains beyond the city" (183). But the essay's powerful one sentence paragraph makes it clear that for Kerouac a life lived on the trail in "the emerald mountains beyond the city" was fast becoming an unobtainable dream--a dream spoiled by what he saw as the intervention of the "evil city" into the "virtuous desert." Bitterly, he concludes:

> "The woods are full of wardens" (183).

Less threatening, but equally disturbing for Kerouac, was the rapid extinction of the hobo's way of life as the middle class automobile vacation usurped the traveling hobo's right to the landscape. In his 1962 novel, *Big Sur*, Kerouac notes that "things have changed in America, you can't get a ride anymore" when hitchhiking (44). In place of the

free spirited, hitchhiking protagonist of *Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith, *Big Sur* offers the grimly cynical Jack Duluoz, who bemoans what he sees as the commercialization and the sterilization of the outdoors. Standing by the roadside, rucksack in hand, Duluoz muses on the situation of the middle class fathers who drive the family station wagons which pass him by:

> But the P.T.A. has prevailed over every one of his desires by now, 1960's, it's no time for him to yearn for the Big Two Hearted River and the old sloppy pants and the string of fish in the tent, or the woodfire with bourbon at night---It's time for motels, roadside driveins, bringing napkins to the gang in the car, having the car washed before the return trip---And if he thinks he wants to explore any of the silent secret roads of America it's no go, the lady in the sneering dark glasses has now become the navigator and she sits there sneering over her previously printed blue-lined roadmap distributed by happy executives in neckties to the vacationists of America who would also wear neckties (after having come along so far) but the vacation fashion is sports shirts, long visored hats, dark glasses, pressed slacks and baby's first shoes dipped in gold dangling from the dashboard. (45)

In the decade of the sixties, the commercialization of nature and governmental encroachment into the wilderness, similar to the kind Kerouac alludes to in "The Vanishing American Hobo," and *Big Sur* would become key concerns among many American nature writers and wilderness advocates such as Gary Snyder, and especially, Edward Abbey.[10]

Whether Kerouac's alienation from the natural world in the final years of his life was actually due to the incursion of the growing forces of commercialization and governmental authority into the wilderness, as he indicates in his later writings, or was due to other factors, such as his growing problem with alcohol, or a shift back to Catholicism from Buddhism, is uncertain. But what is clear is that for a brief period in the artist's career during the mid-1950's, nature did matter to Jack Kerouac and it occupied a central place in

his fiction. *The Dharma Bums* was a dramatic departure from Kerouac's major work, *On The Road*, but in many ways the novel's major themes are the same as the earlier book's: a quest for freedom, a quest for the self, and a search for new (and sometimes old) alternatives in post-war America. It is appropriate that Gary Snyder, the real-life counterpart of Kerouac's "great new hero of American culture" Japhy Ryder, should have the last word in this matter: "In a way," he says, "the Beat Generation was a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed heretofore, namely Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum" (quoted in McLeod 491). *The Dharma Bums* represents Jack Kerouac's effort to place himself in this lineage, and to enter into one of the oldest of these "models and myths" in American literature: that of the writer's quest for meaning in the natural world.

NOTES

[1] At least one other critic has noted the importance of the hobo in Kerouac's fiction. See Frederick Feied's *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac*. New York: Citadel Press, 1964. Unfortunately, Feied does not deal with any of Kerouac's hobo sketches from *Lonesome Traveler* however; he limits his chapter-length discussion of Kerouac to *On The Road* and *Dharma Bums*.

[2] The poetry which Kerouac refers to here can be found in Snyder's *Myths & Texts*. See section 2 of "Logging," 3-4.

[3] Morely's character is based on California poet, author and wilderness advocate John Montgomery (1919-1992), whose recollections of his days with Kerouac are contained in his book *Kerouac West Coast: A Bohemian Pilot Detailed Navigational Instructions* (Fels & Firn Press 1976).

[4] Gary Snyder also deals with this passage from Muir. See "John Muir on Mt. Ritter" (section 8 of "Burning") in *Myths & Texts*, 43-44.

[5] Despite the great emphasis placed on the subject in the novel's early reviews, this is one of the few instances in which illicit drug use is mentioned in the novel.

[6] Ryder's remarks here are strikingly similar to Snyder's later essay "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," contained in *Earth House Hold* (1969).

[7] Kerouac may also be commenting indirectly on his own composition method here--his trademark technique of typing entire novels on a single long role of Teletype paper.

[8] Gary Snyder, Japhy's real life counterpart, has in fact pursued this epoch poem for nearly three decades, publishing sections from it on several occasions during his career as a writer. See: *Six Sections From Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Four Seasons Foundation 1965).

[9] In a 1994 interview with me, Kerouac's friend Philip Whalen (Warren Coughlin in *Dharma Bums*) characterized Kerouac's interest in Zen Buddhism as "deep but not very lasting." Japhy Ryder seems to concur, chiding Smith near the end of their time together: "Oh, don't start preaching Christianity to me, I can just see you on your deathbed kissing the cross like some old Karamozov or like our old friend Dwight Goddard who spent his life as a Buddhist and suddenly returned to Christianity in his last days" (159).

[10] See Abbey's chapter "The Heat of Noon: Rock and Tree and Cloud" in *Desert Solitaire* (1968), in which he argues "[T]he wilderness should be preserved for political reasons. We may need it someday not only as a refuge from excessive industrialism but also as a refuge from authoritarian government" (130). For Abbey's comments on the commercialization of nature via the family automobile vacation, see his chapter "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks," also in *Desert Solitaire*.

IV. "THE JOURNAL OF A STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL": NATURE AND THE POETRY OF LEW WELCH

"But for my children, I would have them keep their distance
from the thickening center; corruption
Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the
monster's feet there are left the mountains."

Robinson Jeffers "Shine, Perishing Republic" (1925)

"I am a poet," wrote Lew Welch in 1964:

> My job is writing poems, reading them out loud, getting them printed, studying, learning how to become the kind of man who has something of worth to say. It's a great job.
>
> Naturally I'm starving to death. (*How I Work* 3)

A poetic career which spanned two decades earned Lew Welch little fame and almost no income. His collected poems, *Ring of Bone*, remained unpublished until two years after his death in 1971. Aside from Aram Saroyan's slim, loosely structured biography, *Genesis Angel: The Saga of Lew Welch and the Beat Generation*, almost no serious study of the poet and his work has yet been undertaken.

This is unfortunate, since in the poet's brief forty-four years, he was able to produce a finely crafted and innovative body of work which Samuel Charters has rightfully called "a group of poems that are among the purest and most precise of all the Beat creations" (539). Welch wrote in a variety of forms--poems, songs, fiction, one act plays--on topics which reflected his varied life experiences as he strived to subsidize his art: ad man, commercial fisherman, cab driver, dock worker, teacher. But more often than not, these

creations dealt with nature and humanity's place in it, for Welch was a writer who struggled with, and reveled in, this theme for much of his career. As his friend Gary Snyder noted in his introduction to Welch's posthumously published *Selected Poems* (1973):

> Ultimately, Lew's poems are devotional songs to the Goddess Gaia: Planet Earth's Biosphere: and he is truly one of the few who have Gone Beyond, in grasping the beauty of that ecstatic Mutual Offering called the Food Chain. (ii)

Indeed, much of Welch's work can be seen as a reflection of a life-long discomfort with modern, urban America, and a yearning to find his place as what he referred to as "a Native of a World" (*Ring* 108). In the preface to his collected poems, *Ring of Bone,* Welch pointed to the tension between life in the urban, human-centered world and the world dominated by nature as a central point of balance in his writing:

> The shape of *Ring of Bone* is circular, or back and forth. Naturally such a form never ends. The principle characters are The Mountain, The City, and The Man who attempts to understand and live with them. The Man changes more than The Mountain and The City, and it appears he will always need both. (3)

Although this balance between Man and Mountain, city and wilderness, is a constant in Welch's writing, there can be little doubt which side of the scale the poet favored; as he wrote to James Wilson: "Enlightenment, as I see it, is a process whereby a person gradually resigns from the world that is man, and thereby becomes a member of the world that is not man."[1]

Beginnings

Lewis Barrett Welch was born in Phoenix, Arizona on August 16, 1926, the son of a wealthy, highly intelligent mother, and an inattentive, often absent, father. His parents' marriage was short-lived, and in 1929 Welch's mother, Dorothy Brownfield, took him and his sister west, where they spent the next fifteen years in what the poet would recall as

"dozens of little California towns, never in one place three years" (*IR* II,129). Welch rarely saw his father, Lew "Speed" Welch, again, but seems to have credited his brief relationship with his father with instilling in him an enduring love for hunting, fishing, and the outdoors. "This is the one thing Lew gave me," he wrote later in a letter to his mother:

> By the one thing Lew gave me I mean that when a boy knows his father is good at something that's male and easy to understand, and that everyone can admire, then, whether or not he does it with the guy, he has the built-in right to it. I came to guns not as a stranger. And, you know, in all fairness, a great many men get far less from their fathers. (*IR* I, 87)

During his school years, Welch's family continued to move often, never allowing him to spend more than two or three years attending the same school. One of the few constants in his early life was his love of reading, and here too, a developing fascination with nature can be noted. Ernest Thompson Seton, the turn of the century naturalist / author of works such *Lives of the Hunted* and *Wild Animals I Have Known* was among Welch's favorite writers in junior high school. When Welch began to read poetry during his early teens, the poet he was most drawn to was Robert Service, whose tales of the Alaskan wilderness, such as those captured in *The Spell of the Yukon*, earned him a permanent place in Welch's library (Meltzer 200).

After finishing high school in Palo Alto, Welch enlisted for a brief stint in the U.S. Air Force, but quickly rejoined civilian life a year later when the Second World War ended. He then attended Stockton Junior College, where his interests in literature and writing began in earnest. In 1948, Welch transferred to Reed College in Portland, Oregon as an English major (Samuel Charters 542). It was here that the writer would make some acquaintances who would change the course of his career.

In the spring of 1949 Welch rented a house near campus with a room-mate he deemed, in a letter home, "one of the finest people I've ever known," an undergraduate

anthropology major named Gary Snyder (*IR* I, 1). In January of the following year, the two were joined by a third room-mate, an ex-G.I. undergraduate with an interest in literature and Oriental languages, Philip Whalen (Christensen 556). The three students were all aspiring writers, and a strong friendship based on this shared craft quickly developed--a friendship which would last as long as Welch lived.

By his senior year, Welch was already beginning to publish his first poems in *Janus*, the little magazine he co-edited with other Reed students. The first of these, a brief imagist poem entitled "Skunk Cabbage," foreshadows the poet's life-long fascination with close observation of the natural world:

> Slowly in the swamps unfold
> great yellow petals of a
> savage thing, a
> tropic thing--
>
> While no stilt-legged birds watch,
> no monkey screams,
> those great yellow petals,
> unfold.
>
> Rank plant. (*Ring* 37)

Many of Welch's early poems, like this one, bear a strong resemblance to the work of William Carlos Williams: short powerful lines, an insistence on common language, and stark yet bold imagery. This is no coincidence; Welch knew and respected the poetry of Williams--especially the older poet's epic, *Paterson*.[2] During Welch's final semester at Reed College, Williams came to the college to read his work. When he arrived, he was met by Welch, Whalen and Snyder, who each brought with them drafts of their poems for his examination. In addition, Welch showed Williams his senior thesis on Gertrude Stein,

which he read enthusiastically. Williams recommended that Welch try to revise and publish the manuscript, and offered to arrange for a reading of the text with an editor at Random House (*IR* I, 40-41).

The help and encouragement offered by Williams provided Welch with the needed impetus to think of himself as a writer; he jokingly signed a letter to his mother describing his meeting with Williams "Lew (the voice of the latter half of the 20th century)" (*IR* I, 42). Following his graduation, he set off to New York in order to visit Williams and to continue work on the Stein book. He rented an apartment on West 82nd Street, found a job as a clerk in a large department store, and spent his off hours researching and revising the Stein manuscript in the rare book room at the New York Library, but he abandoned the project after only a few months in the city. In April 1951 he wrote to his mother, in what would be the first of many statements concerning the claustrophobia he felt in large cities:

> New York I'm afraid is nothing more than a noisy rock.
>
> I can't breathe in it even.
>
> It whupped me.
>
> Therefore leave. (*IR* I, 52)

Chicago: In The Heart of the "Murcan Machine"

Abandoning, at least temporarily, his ambitions as a writer, in the Fall of 1951, Welch applied for admission to the University of Chicago's graduate school, majoring first in History of Philosophy, and then switching after a semester, to English. He found some of his courses stimulating, but as a whole, Welch found the experience--and the setting--difficult to endure. He wrote to Snyder, who was preparing to enter graduate school at Berkeley:

> What are you goin' to do in that Western province. I ought to go with you. This place has me stifled already. And I tried. Honest. Three weeks in a literature

> course and not one (1) word have I heard about literature. . . . These people hate pomes [sic]. (*IR* I, 65)

After several semesters of graduate work at the University of Chicago, Welch left the school, but stayed on in the city, taking a job with Montgomery Ward's retail advertising department.[3] For a time, it seemed that Lew Welch could live happily within the city; a new marriage to native Chicagoan Mary Garber, and the promise of a high salary for his work as an advertising copy writer made Chicago seem, he wrote, "more bearable all the time" (*IR* I, 76). Weekend hunting trips into the countryside outside of Chicago even yielded occasional glimpses of beauty, although Welch clearly longed for his native West. In a 1957 letter to his mother, he notes:

> But the farm country of Illinois is beautiful if you give it a chance. It's silly to keep expecting the land to look like the Rockies. All you accomplish is a blindness to the flat, gold, low-skied beauty that's all over the Midwest. (*IR* I, 87)

But such observations became increasingly rare in the months that followed, as Welch's growing unhappiness and discontent with Chicago--and the modern city in general--again rose to the surface. What had a few years before appeared as a lucrative job as an ad writer now was seen by Welch as a prostitution of his talents. "It finally got through to me that this is humiliating. . . ." he wrote to Gary Snyder on April 22, 1957, "We are paid for pieces of pride" (*IR* I, 90). That same day, Welch wrote to Philip Whalen about his "intolerable daily life" in Chicago, advising him that he was "putting everything together into a poem about cities" (*IR* I, 91). Enclosed with the letter were five pages of poetry, some of which later became part of Welch's urban collage "Din Poem." In it, the poet puts forth what would become a recurring image in his poems and essays-- the modern city as an artificial construct imposed upon the landscape of the natural world:

> I am on top of the Empire State Building leaning on the
> railing which I have carefully examined to see if it's

strongly made. The sound of it comes all that way, up,
to me. A hum. Thousands of ventilators far away. Now
and then I hear an improbable clank. The air, even up
here, is warmed by it.

To the north a large green rectangle, Central Park, lies
flat, clean-edged, indented. A skin has been pulled off,
a bandage removed, and a small section of the Planet has
been allowed to grow.

I think, "They have chosen to do this in order to save
their lives." And then I think, "It is not really a section
of the Planet, it is a perfect imitation of a section of the Planet
(remembering the zoo). It is how they think it might look."
I am struck by their wisdom. Moved. (*Ring* 107)

To Welch's discerning eye, even those areas within the modern city which have traditionally been seen as oases where nature is allowed to flourish--the parks--are themselves urban impositions on the natural terrain. "Flat, clean-edged," and "indented," Central Park represents for Welch not an effort aimed at preserving a "small section of the Planet," but instead at preserving the sanity of the city's human population by means of illusion and fantasy. The comment on the "wisdom" involved in such an arrangement in the final line of the section's third stanza is likely ironic.

By the summer of 1957, Welch had come to realize that life in Chicago had become unbearable for him. His drinking increased, as did his discomfort at life within the confines of what he called "this dangerous city" (*IR* I, 106). "This is how I live:" he angrily wrote to Philip Whalen:

> The alarm clock starts me. I have a hangover. I am nauseated all morning. . . . I can't keep down orange juice, toast, and tea. I chew gum and go to my car dressed in a suit and a tie. I fight idiots who don't know how [to] drive on a highway where thousands of cars go too fast and all the signs, streetlights, and policemen are confused and wrong. . . . At the office I do the urgent, not the important. A friend describes it as "pissing on small fires.". . . All day long I am humiliated by inferior people who insist that I must do something in less time than it takes. . . .Then I come home. The same idiots that can't drive are now as furious as I am. We try to kill each other for 30 minutes. Then I am home. I have a cocktail. I have 5 more. (*IR* I,106)

Welch ended the letter with his plans to quit Chicago and return to graduate school, and ultimately, a college teaching job in his native West: "Back to health. Back to friends. Back to beautiful country" (107).

By the following October, Welch had realized part of this goal; Montgomery Ward granted him a transfer to their Oakland, California office, and he and his wife relocated there soon after. At long last Welch was back in his home region, and squarely in the middle of the San Francisco poetry renaissance he'd read so much about in the national press. His plan was to continue his advertising work for the firm long enough to pay off his bills and then, as he told Snyder, "kick the Business Habit" and devote his time to writing (*IR* I, 116). He vowed to Whalen also that he was through with the "Murcan [American][4] Machine," saying:

> . . .[T]here is nothing for me to do except get out of it and make it as well as possible and know finally and for all time that it's quite important not to help the damned thing . . . (*IR* I, 115)

If the path to enlightenment, for Lew Welch, meant gradually resigning "from the world that is man," then this decision to leave the financial security offered by corporate America marks an important step on that path; for the remainder of his life Welch struggled to feed

and clothe himself by means of a variety of part-time occupations, but from this period forward he identified himself, and his occupation, as writer.

Welch's "Chicago Poem," perhaps his most famous and most frequently anthologized piece, is an eloquent statement in verse of the poet's mid-life change in direction away from urban, corporate America. First drafted in June 1957, near the end of the poet's residence in the Midwest, the poem begins with the first person narrator (presumably Welch)[5] recalling the gray, dismal landscape of mid-twentieth century Chicago:

> I lived here nearly 5 years before I could
>
> meet the middle western day with anything approaching
>
> Dignity. It's a place that lets you
>
> understand why the Bible is the way it is:
>
> Proud people cannot live here.
>
> The land's too flat. Ugly sullen and big it
>
> pounds men down past humbleness. They
>
> Stoop at 35 possibly cringing from the heavy and
>
> terrible sky. In country like this there
>
> Can be no God but Jahweh. (*Ring* 10)

As an early San Francisco reviewer, Grover Sales, wrote in response to hearing Welch read the poem: "This is not the Chicago of Sandburg but the *Rome* of Juvenal and the *London* of William Blake" (*IR* II, 141). In place of Sandburg's 1916 vision of Chicago as "Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders," four decades later Welch portrays a hopeless urban atmosphere where men "Stoop at 35" under the horrible weight of their surroundings. And in place of Sandburg's romantic vision of a vital and expansive city "proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation," Welch depicts a city fallen victim to its own industrial excesses:

In the mills and refineries of its south side Chicago
passes its natural gas in flames
Bouncing like bunsens from stacks a hundred feet high.
The stench stabs at your eyeballs.
The whole sky green and yellow backdrop for the skeleton
steel of a bombed-out town. (10)

The speaker's only solace is not found within the city, but in nature. Where Sandburg had written of Chicago as being "cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness," the narrator in Welch's poem finds his only moments of hope in the wild. After five years inside the city, an alternative arises which allows him to "recognize the ferocity" inherent in his urban existence: "Finally I found some quiet lakes / and a farm where they let me shoot pheasant" (10). Away from the city while pheasant hunting or fishing, he is able to differentiate between the man-made chaos of Chicago's south side, and what Welch might call "the world that is not man":

All things considered, it's a gentle and undemanding
planet, even here. Far gentler
Here than any of a dozen other places. The trouble is
always and only with what we build on top of it. (11)

As the speaker returns to Chicago after a day in the farmlands, he is determined to accept the modern city for what it is: a human creation which is no longer under human control--a violent and dangerous monster who now threatens those to whom it once offered shelter:

Driving back I saw Chicago rising in its gasses and I
knew again that never will the
Man be made to stand against this pitiless, unparalleled
monstrosity. It
Snuffles on the beach of its Great Lake like a

blind, red, rhinoceros.
It's already running us down.

You can't fix it. You can't make it go away.
I don't know what you're going to do about it,
But I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm just
going to walk away from it. Maybe
A small part of it will die if I'm not around

feeding it anymore. (11)

The solution, according to Welch's speaker, is total resignation from the "monstrosity" of urban, industrial, America: "I'm just / going to walk away from it." But the poem's final stanza presents more than just a statement of dejection and defeat. It is a radical act of individual civil disobedience which recalls Henry David Thoreau's statement in *Walden* that "I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run 'amok' against society; but I preferred that society should run 'amok' against me, it being the desperate party" (155). In the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau had urged Americans to let their lives be a "friction to stop the machine" of an unjust and cruel society (644); but a hundred years later, Welch seems to suggest, what he referred to as the "Murcan Machine" had become unstoppable: "You can't fix it. You can't make it go away." The best one could hope for is to not be used as fuel--to let your absence be a friction to stop the machine.

San Francisco: Meditation at Muir Beach

When Welch arrived in the West with his wife Mary in the fall of 1957, he found a California quite different from the one he had left more than a decade earlier. San Francisco, long a haven for America's Bohemian population, now hosted a burgeoning youth sub-culture: "Telegraph Hill with its children-type Bohemes was a real shock," he

wrote to Whalen (*IR* I, 118). Welch found San Francisco a welcome change from life in Chicago, and enjoyed the thriving poetry and arts community which had sprung up in the Bay Area. He took in readings by Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti during his first few months in the city, as well as jazz performances by Dave Brubeck and others at clubs like the Blackhawk. "Everything is jumping here," he wrote to Snyder, who was at sea aboard a Pacific tanker, "or so it seems to be in contrast to the plain" (*IR* I, 120).

Despite Welch's appreciation for San Francisco's cultural life, however, there are signals in his letters from the period indicating a desire for an even deeper withdrawal from urban life than his move from Chicago offered. Just after Christmas 1957, in a letter to Whalen, he intimated his longing for a life uncluttered by all but the essentials: "There's plenty of time left over after meeting the very gentle needs of the planet, the bowels, the heart. The only overly demanding thing is all those people who try to fill their days with something that can't possibly demand that much. Then they try to get us to do it too. They stone us if we sit" (*IR* I, 126).

The events of 1958 moved Welch closer to the kind of life he described to his friend Whalen. In March he was fired from his job as an advertising writer with Montgomery Ward, and in July his marriage to Mary Garber dissolved. Like the world of commerce, the "American Homemaking Bit," as Welch referred to marriage, seemed to be just one more mystifying institution for the poet. He wrote Whalen that "for me it's all soap and machinery ritualized to a point beyond my understanding," adding that "I bungle around like a guy trying to play shortstop for the Giants while wearing the equipment for, and observing the rules of, badminton. I've sent myself to the showers, I'm sure to the relief of all concerned" (*IR* I, 146).

His marriage over, his career as an ad writer behind him, Welch moved deeper into the rapidly developing counterculture. He found work as a cab driver, and after a brief stay at Gary Snyder's Mill Valley cabin, moved into San Francisco's East-West House, one of the

city's early experiments in communal living.[6] It was during this period that Welch first seriously examined Zen Buddhism, which was then enjoying an unprecedented popularity among American youth. In October he began a course of Zen practice (zazen) and meditation under the guidance of Gary Snyder at Snyder's Marin-an cabin in nearby Mill Valley. From the beginning, the poet appears to have been a sincere but at times skeptical adherent to Buddhist practice. Soon after beginning his Zen studies he described the routine to Whalen:

> Mister Snyder has us sitting in his shack Japanese style all the while ringing bells and smacking blocks of wood together. Then we run around the woods in pitch darkness falling over fences and otherwise being foolish, return, sit, drink tea, sit, and go home. (*IR* I, 149)

Although Welch would later renounce Buddhism--and indeed all religion--as "mind trash" (Meltzer 225), Zen practice does seem to lie at the root of a good deal of the poet's thought during the late fifties and early sixties. The poet's long introspective piece, "Wobbly Rock," which was published as Welch's first small chapbook in 1960, exemplifies Welch's use of Buddhist sources in his writing during this period.[7] The poem begins with an epigraph which both dedicates the work to Snyder and quotes him: "for Gary Snyder / 'I think I'll be the Buddha of this place' / and sat himself / down" (*Ring* 54).

"Wobbly Rock" is a long poem, a meditation on nature in six sections, occasioned by an encounter Welch had with a balancing boulder along the sea-shore at Muir Beach, California. The poem's first section attempts to place the action of the poem, and the reader it directly addresses, squarely in the physical world: "It's a real rock":

> (believe this first)
>
> Resting on actual sand at the surf's edge:
> Muir Beach, California

(like everything else I have

somebody showed it to me and I found it myself)

Hard common stone

Size of a large haystack

It moves when hit by waves

Actually shudders

(even a good gust of wind will do it

if you sit real still and keep your mouth shut)

Notched to certain center it

Yields and then comes back to it:

Wobbly tons (54)

The poet's precise choice of adjectives--"real, "actual, "common," and "certain"--can leave little doubt that he intends the rock to be seen as genuine, a rock as real as words alone can make it, to serve as the starting point for the meditative stream of consciousness which follows throughout the remainder of the poem.[8] The poem's sections are loosely linked, leaping from one subject to the next, with only the ocean and the speaker's mind to contain them. In the second section, the focus of attention is drawn away from the lone balancing boulder, where the poem's speaker is seated, to the surrounding sea-scape, which takes on the aura of a carefully constructed Japanese Zen garden as the speaker attempts to empty his mind in meditation:

Sitting here you look below to other rocks

Precisely placed as rocks of Ryoanji:

Foam like swept stones

(the mind getting it all confused again:
"snow like frosting on a cake"
"rose so beautiful it don't look real")

Isn't there a clear example here--
Stone garden shown to me by
Berkeley painter I never met [9]
A thousand books and somebody else's boatride ROCKS

(garden)

EYE

(nearly empty despite this clutter-image all
the opposites cancelling out a
CIRCULAR process: *Frosting-snow*) (55)

The speaker's mind is a jumble of conflicting "clutter-image" as he strives to empty his mind in meditation. The stones visible from his vantage point suggest another meditation site on the other side of the Pacific--the stone gardens of Ryoanji. This thought, in turn, leads him to wonder at the authenticity of his own experience, having gained his knowledge of Ryoanji second hand after reading an article on them "by a Berkeley painter I never met." The inner life of the mind, experienced through "A thousand books and somebody else's boatride," is juxtaposed against the reality he experiences at the moment: "ROCKS."

In the next stanza, these "opposites" which the speaker holds in his mind (the sea-scape and the stone garden, "Frosting-snow") become reconciled, as the "CIRCULAR

process" of the speaker's thought becomes complete, and he realizes that the Japanese stone garden is in fact an imitation of a natural sea-shore much like the one he occupies:

Or think of the monks who made it 4 hundred 50 years ago
lugged the boulders from the sea
Swept to foam original gravelstone from the sea (55)

The final lines of this portion of the poem further blur the distinction between Ryoanji and Muir Beach, between nature and imitation. All that remain are rocks, "all rocks," and the spaces between them.

And now all rocks are different and
All the spaces in between

(which includes about everything)

The instant
After it is made (55)

The poem's third section examines the role of nature in shaping and transforming the individual, as the speaker reflects on his own life-long connections to the sea. "*I have been in many shapes before I attained congenial form*,"[10] he begins, "All those years on the beach, lifetimes . . .":

When I was a boy I used to watch the Pelican:
It always seemed his wings broke
As he dropped, like scissors, in the sea . . .
Night fire flicking the shale cliff
Balls tight as a cat after the cold swim
Her young snatch sandy . . . (56)

Here, the sea become an integral part of the poet's autobiography--the backdrop for earlier "lifetimes" on the beach as a child, the setting for a youthful sexual encounter,

before the speaker separated himself from the ocean. The section's middle stanza speaks of a return: "*I have travelled / I have made a circuit / I have lived in 14 cities*" (56) The speaker's "circuit" is of course a reflection of Welch's own life: a youth spent on the California coast, the middle years spent removed from nature in Eastern cities, before finally returning to the "congenial form" we now see meditating again by the ocean. The section ends with a riddle, a koan, which asks: "Waves and the sea. If you / take away the sea / Tell me what it is" (56). Although the koan deals ostensibly with the unbreakable bond between wave and sea, coming as it does at the end of this autobiographical section of "Wobbly Rock," it is also suggestive of another unbreakable bond, between the poet and the sea.

This question of one man's relationship to nature is broadened in the poem's fourth section, which begins to explore the theme which preoccupies much of the second half of Welch's "Wobbly Rock": humankind's relation to the natural world. From his vantage point atop the rock, the speaker recalls the previous day's human activity at the beach:

> Yesterday the weather was nice there were lots of people
> Today it rains, the only other figure is far up the beach
>
> (by the curve of his body I know he leans against the
> tug of his fishingline: there is no separation)
>
> Yesterday they gathered and broke, gathered and broke like
> Feeding swallows dipped down to pick up something ran back to
> Show it
> And a young girl with jeans rolled to mid-thigh ran
> Splashing in the rain creek (57)

But the idyllic picture from the previous day of humans enjoying the beach as naturally as "feeding swallows" is short-lived, lasting only until something as trivial as a change in the

weather again divorces them from the natural world. Only a lone fisherman remains in contact with the non-human world, a reminder that in reality "there is no separation" between man and nature.[11]

The long-distance perspective achieved by the speaker from his station on the faraway rock allows for a viewpoint which is both detached and at the same time very intimate. His focus shifts from a wide angle view of the mass actions of the crowd as "they gathered and broke" like a flock of birds, to a close-up of a single young girl "splashing in the rain creek." Yet throughout the section the observer's tone is decidedly isolated, as if he were viewing his fellow humans as strange creatures to be pitied--as detached from them as they are from the rest of nature. He asks them:

> Did it mean nothing to you Animal that turns this
> Planet to a smoky rock?
> Back among your quarrels
> How can I remind you of your gentleness?
>
> Jeans are washed
> Shells all lost or broken
> Driftwood sits in shadow boxes on a tracthouse wall
>
> Like swallows you were, gathering
> Like people I wish for . . . (57)

In Welch's view, the weekend visitors who flock to the beach in good weather, only to return to the "quarrels" of their human existence with their shells and driftwood, have flirted with a potential not apparent to them--the potential to realize their place in the natural world. "Like swallows you were, gathering," the speaker laments, "Like people I wish for . . ."

The poem's fifth section presents a view of humanity's role in nature quite different from that of the fair weather tourist, as Welch's speaker recalls a fishing trip with two companions, "3 of us in a boat the size of a bathtub" (58). His description of the life surrounding him as the boat enters a small cove is stratified, with each stanza coming to represent a different niche in the sea-side environment:

Below us:

fronds of kelp

fish

crustaceans

eels

Then us

then rocks at the cliff's base

starfish

(hundreds of them sunning themselves)

final starfish on the highest rock then

Cliff

4 feet up the cliff a flower

grass

further up more grass

grass over the cliff's edge

branch of pine then

Far up in the sky

a hawk (58)

The passage is decidedly bio-centric, an ecological reworking of the medieval notion of a "great chain of being" which placed God at the top of the philosophical ladder, above angels, followed by man, and finally, the "lower" forms of animal life. Welch's depiction

of the ocean eco-system works consciously to overturn such hierarchies by placing the human figures inconspicuously afloat amidst eels, rocks, and starfish, with only the words "Then us" to quietly give away their position. This section of the poem seems to possess an ecological vision not unlike Aldo Leopold's notion of the "land ethic" presented in Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). "The land ethic," in Leopold's words, "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." Under such an ethic, man becomes not a ruler or "conqueror of the land-community," but instead, a "plain member and citizen of it" (204). Clearly, such a reworking of humanity's place in the environment is at work in Welch's portrayal of the Pacific eco-system.

The poem's fifth section ends with a view of the earth's biosphere which again calls into question traditional Western views of humanity's place in the vast and finally unknowable natural world:

> Clutching to our chip we are jittering in a spectrum
> Hung in the film of this narrow band
> Green
>
> to our eyes only (58)

Again, the human role is portrayed as diminutive, creatures invisibly struggling "in the film of this narrow band" which makes up the Earth's surface. The final lines, "Green / to our eyes only," serves as a final reminder that there exist many perspectives from which life on Earth can be viewed--all but one of them non-human.

In the final section of "Wobbly Rock," the poet returns to the theme of ecological wholeness. He recalls an insight during an earlier moment of meditation which provided him with a vision of complete unity with the natural world:

> On a trail not far from here
> Walking in meditation
> We entered a dark grove

And I lost all separation in step with the

Eucalyptus as the trail walked back beneath me (59)

The blurring of human and plant life, of the animate and the inanimate, in this stanza's final lines, is carried still further in the poem's climax, in which all boundaries which separate one form of matter or energy from another are erased: "Wind water / Wave rock / Sea sand / (there is no separation)" (59). "Wobbly Rock" ends, as it began, with an image of balance--an image made richer and more complex throughout each of the poem's six sections:

Wind that wets my lips is salt

Sea breaking within me balanced as the

Sea that floods these rocks. Rock

Returning to the sea, easily, as

Sea once rose from it. It

Is a sea rock

(easily)

I am

Rocked by the sea (59)

"Step Out Onto The Planet"

Despite the publication of "Wobbly Rock" in 1960 at David Haselwood's Auerhahn Press, and the inclusion of his poems in Donald Allen's ground-breaking anthology, *The New American Poetry*, the year 1960 proved to be a traumatic one for Welch. Nearly a decade of heavy drinking and overwork ended in a physical and emotional breakdown and a bout with cirrhosis of the liver. The moment of crisis brought on by Welch's deteriorating health rekindled the poet's desire for refuge from modern urban life. In a

letter he wrote to Jack Kerouac in April, he described a moment of "satori" experienced during his recovery: "It all seems so silly--punishing my poor ole liver just because I can't bear to see the absurd bastards tear this planet and each other apart. I'm just going to stand back and watch from now on" (*IR* I, 190). In July of the same year, he closed a long letter to Allen Ginsberg by saying: "I seem to be entering the years of hermitage, and I welcome them--almost long for it" (*IR* I, 222).

A letter Welch wrote to his old college professor James Wilson during this period clearly illustrates the poet's evolving determination to distance himself from what he saw as a corrupt and false society. Immediately after noting to Wilson that he had been "reading the works of John Muir," whom Welch terms an "incredible genius," he describes the rationale behind his withdrawal from human concerns:

> One way of dividing everything for purposes of thought is to separate the *world of man* from the *world that is not man.* Since this came through my mind, many things are now perfectly clear which used to be very confusing. . . . The world of man is entirely arbitrary (i.e. arbitration, law) and illusory. The world that is not man is chaos, void, discontinuous. (*IR* I, 195)

After establishing such a distinction, and noting that "most men spend all their time in the world of man," where their "feet only touch pavement," Welch reminds Wilson that although the majority of humans may not acknowledge it, they are also part of a larger, non-human world: "Now, of course, they are also in the world that is not man--all their gestures are about this, or with this--but they are asleep to this" (195).

The alternative to this societal slumber, in Welch's view, is a rejection of the forces which had imposed it, and the acceptance of, and the awakening to, the natural world. He tells Wilson: "Enlightenment, as I see it, is a process whereby a person gradually resigns from the world that is man, and thereby becomes a member of the world that is not man" (*IR* I, 196). But, the poet adds, becoming a member of the non-human community in no way provides a Rosetta Stone for understanding nature: "Understand," he writes, "world

that is not man, though seen as larger, is not seen by me at all. It is unimaginable, inscrutable. I can only recognize timeless experiences 'with it' " (196).

Welch's poem from this period, "Step Out Onto The Planet" (later included in his *Hermit Poems* collection) is a challenge for his readers to awaken themselves to the wonders of their "unimaginable, inscrutable" surroundings. The poem was originally published as a broadside to publicize a reading done in conjunction with Snyder and Whalen in the early sixties. The leaflet featured a crude circle drawn in Chinese brush style with the text of the poem written in calligraphy beneath it:

Step out onto the planet.
Draw a circle a hundred feet round.

Inside the circle are
300 things nobody understands, and, maybe
nobody's ever really seen.

How many can you find? (*Ring* 73)

The challenge offered in the poem--to face nature with a new and heightened sense of wonder, and to rejoice in the attempt to know the unknowable--was one which the poet took upon himself for much of the remainder of his life. By 1961, what he referred to as his "hypersensitivity to the senselessness of human interference upon each other's easy lives: the lead-pipe cinch made difficult," made even the relaxed, non-conformist routine of San Francisco's East-West House unbearable for Welch (*IR* II, 31). That spring, at the age of 35, he began what would be two years of the most meaningful work of his life, as a commercial fisherman.

Welch's writings from his days in San Francisco's salmon fleet indicate that what he most valued in the work was not the paycheck (although the money was at times good), but instead the closeness to natural forces. "The work," he wrote Snyder, "is connected

with things I know are real: weather, animals, tides, fatigue, cranky tools" (*IR* II, 34). Describing the "state of near nirvana" he attained on the water, Welch told his mother: "You float, wheel, through a universe so real as to make the human world even more absurd & petty" (33).

In an essay he wrote later on his experiences aboard the Pacific salmon trollers, Welch extoled the virtues of what he referred to as "real work," a phrase which Gary Snyder would return to again and again in the decade to follow. For Welch, the term meant work which placed one in close contact with the production of useful goods. "Real work" describes the difficult, but often ecstatic experience of "how it is to go fishing, that is to catch fish for the people to eat," versus what Welch called "the oppressive vision" he had left behind in the world of corporate America, "what it is that a smart strong man might devote his entire life to Post Toasties or Prudential Life Insurance" (*IR* II, 44).

This first-hand experience with the rudimentary elements of the natural world had benefits for the writer as well, Welch believed. He told Snyder that "there is something very wrong with being a professional artist," who was a mere observer of natural events. To be fully accurate and truthful, he contended, the artist must also be an active participant:

> [I]t seems to me that even Whitman is out of focus because it isn't the same watching the wheat being harvested and actually getting the chaff in your collarband & Hemingway never hunted as an Eskimo does, for the work of it, the providing, & naturally he never hunted with the same depth & skill. (*IR* II, 37)

For Welch then, the "real work" of salmon fishing allowed him to fulfill a useful and meaningful role in human commerce, as well as providing him with the kind of first-hand experience he valued as an artist; but more importantly, it also provided him a means of acknowledging his place in a much larger system. Embedded in his essay on salmon fishing, amongst the many colorful and exciting details of life on board a troller, is the following paragraph:

> I have lived all my life with people who will laugh at all of this, being too sophisticated to hear what I said except as "another plea to return to nature." But nature is larger than that, expressible in the word-game "Nature." It is all that goes on whether we look at it or not. All-that-goes-on-whether-we-look-at-it-or-not will always go on (though we almost never look at it) and we are in it, in this form, for a little while at least. There is nothing to join since we are as much a charter member as a jellyfish is, as the seasons are. The rest is what drives us mad. And we all know what the rest is. (*IR* II, 43)[12]

Like many of the endeavors in Lew Welch's life, his career as a commercial fisherman ended abruptly. Economic factors, combined with environmental deterioration, pushed Welch away from what he called "a dying industry," in "a dying sea" (*IR* II, 57). Only two years before, he had seen a promising future in life as a fisherman, but by July 1962, his vision of hope had turned to one of environmental ruin. He told Charles Olson: "It is all over. You know it and I know it. I can't, here, tell you all about West Coast fishing, the land which made me, as the coast you MADE, stand, has made you. It is over. All of it" (*IR* II, 57).

"The Journal Of A Strategic Withdrawal": *Hermit Poems*

Following a severe breakdown in the summer of 1962, and the end of his two year relationship with the poet Lenore Kandel, Welch's attentions turned inland. He told Whalen of his plan to "go up to the Salmon River and live in a mining claim cabin & catch big steelhead and never see people," at the same time "writing all truth into imperishable pomes [sic]" (*IR* II, 59). By September he had made the plan a reality, taking over an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps cabin in a remote area near Forks of Salmon, California.[13] After a lifetime of transience, the simple cabin he dubbed "Rat Flat," seemed to the poet like his final destination; "I have finally taken to the woods," he wrote Charles Olson, "I hope forever" (*IR* II, 67). In November, he wrote to Donald Allen, then editor

of *Evergreen Review*, telling him that he intended to write a prose work on his coming "home" to his mountain cabin entitled "A Place to Put the Typewriter"; its subtitle was to be "The Journal of a Strategic Withdrawal" (*IR* II, 86).

The writings emerging from Welch's withdrawal into the California wilderness comprise what Gary Snyder has called the "heart" of Welch's body of work, the poems which comprise his small collection *Hermit Poems* (1965), and another sequence entitled "The Way Back." Snyder notes in his introduction to Welch's *Selected Poems*, that in these works, "Lew really achieved the meeting of an ancient Asian sage-tradition, the 'shack simple'[14] post-frontier back country out-of-work workingman's style, and the rebel modernism of modern art" (ii). In addition, Welch's *Hermit Poems* and those in "The Way Back" fit also into a tradition of American letters spawned by Thoreau's *Walden* and carried into the late twentieth century by writers such as Edward Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*, 1968) and Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974): that of the lone, isolated artist learning from and sharing what Abbey called "a season in the wilderness." Welch's work from the period resounds with Thoreau's stated purpose in *Walden* "to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms" (82):

> The hermit locks his door against the blizzard.
> He keeps the cabin warm.
>
> All winter long he sorts out all he has.
> What was well started shall be finished.
> What was not, should be thrown away.
>
> In spring he emerges with one garment
> and a single book. (*Ring* 76)

Later, in a poem from the "Way Back" series, "He Thanks His Woodpile," Welch places himself in the long lineage of writers who have chosen a life of lonely asceticism over the comforts offered by society:

All winter long I make wood stews:

Poem to stove to woodpile to stove to
typewriter. woodpile. stove.

and can't stop peeking at it!
can't stop opening up the door!
can't stop giggling at it

"Shack Simple"
crazy as Han Shan as
Wittgenstein in his German hut,[15] as
all the others ever were and are

Ancient Order of the Fire Gigglers

who walked away from it, finally,
kicked the habit, finally, of Self, of
man-hooked Man

(which is not, at last, estrangement) (*Ring* 84)

Welch denies that the ascetic hermit's life is one of "estrangement," since for him the rejection of "man-hooked Man" makes possible the embrace of the non-human world. For while the majority of the poems Welch composed at his Forks of Salmon cabin have only

one human subject--the poet himself--they are set amongst a world which is teeming with life and energy. In the poet's view, it is not he that has become estranged from humanity, but rather it is humanity who has become estranged from the non-human world. The opening stanzas for the preface to the *Hermit Poems*, a poem entitled "The Bath," describe a setting of tremendous beauty which has been abandoned as "obsolete" by its previous human inhabitants:

> At last it is raining, the first sign of spring.
> The Blue Jay gets all wet.
>
> Frost-flowers, tiny bright and dry like
> inch high crystal trees or sparkling silver mold,
> acres of them, on heaps of placer boulders all around me,
> are finally washing away. They were beautiful.
> And the big trees rising, dark, behind them.
>
> This canyon is so steep we didn't get sun since late November,
> my "CC" shack and I. Obsolete. The two of us.
> He for his de-funct agency.
> I for this useless art? (*Ring* 67)

In this passage, Welch refers to his shack as "he," with what might seem to be a personification of an inanimate object with which he himself identifies.[16] Given the other poems in the collection, however, it would be a mistake to view the reference to the shack as a personification. It could more accurately be seen as an animation--the acknowledgment of a common life force present in all matter. Rather than portraying the landscape and creatures of Rat Flat in human terms, Welch attempts to depict all beings, human and non-human, as sharing a common energy:

> Apparently wasps

work all their only summer at the nest,
so that new wasps work
all their only summer at the nest,
et cetera.

All my green lizards lost their tails, mating.
Six snakes ate all my frogs.
Butterflies do very odd things with their tongues.

There seems to be no escaping it.
I planted nine tomato plants and water them.
I replace my rotten stoop with a
clean Fir block.

Twelve new poems in less than a week! (*Ring* 71)

Here, the actions of the human--tending a garden to feed himself, repairing his home, and even producing art--are viewed in terms of the supposedly instinctive actions of reptiles and insects engaged in similar tasks. While Welch's voice still harbors some anthropocentric features (i.e. the stewardship of "his" frogs and lizards, and the use of the judgmental word "odd"), there is in the poem a conscious effort to show the poet gradually coming to grips (i.e. "Apparently" and "There *seems* to be no escaping it") with a view of himself as one of many creatures from whom, as the speaker in "Wobbly Rock" stressed, "there is no separation."

"The Way Back"

Welch's stay at Forks of Salmon was not permanent, as he had predicted it would be early in 1962. By November, 1963, Welch decided to again pull up stakes and return to

the San Francisco area, where he would live for the next seven years with Magda Cregg, the new love in his life. The poems in Welch's "The Way Back" sequence chronicle his final days at the remote cabin, and his eventual return to city life. Despite the sense of failure and even, impending doom, which Welch must have felt in his return to the city, there is, in these poems, a kind of missionary zeal, a desire to share the lessons of his hermitage with others. The first poem in the sequence, "He Prepares to Take Leave of His Hut," begins with the pilgrim's dutiful return to the city:

> And They, The Blessed Ones, said to him,
> "Beautiful trip, Avalokiteshvara.[17]
> You never have to go back there again."
>
> And he said, "Thank you very much, but I think I will.
> Those people need all the help they can get." (*Ring* 81)

Although the poems in the "Way Back" sequence document what Welch calls "the Mystical Return" of "The Mountain Man" to the human world (*Ring* 90-92), the focus of most of the poems is still squarely on nature. The centerpiece of the sequence is a long prose-poem entitled "He Begins to Recount His Adventures," a work which encapsulates Welch's wholistic view of nature in clear but eloquent language. It begins:

> I can't remember seeing it any other way but whole, a big round rock wheeling about the heavens and comin' on green to crack sidewalks, gentle and undemanding, as if I saw it first, approaching it from somewhere else.
>
> Everything about it always seemed right. The roundness is right. The way it spins. (*Ring* 94)

The portrait of the planet Welch paints is one of exquisite balance and intricate beauty, one in which "Everything is right, clear down to the smallest parts of it" (95). The view

of Earth as "a gentle and undemanding / planet" first posited in "Chicago Poem," is merged with the poet's later ecological vision of the Earth as an inscrutable and mysterious network of systems--"subworlds living off / further subworlds"--which he had first alluded to in "Step Out Onto the Planet." The poem has only one human inhabitant--the lone figure of John Muir:

> Or John Muir waking in a Sierra meadow, in spring, and finding, inches from his waking eye, a wildflower he, and nobody else, had ever seen. Rising, he found himself in a field of delicate color so complicated he spent the whole day in only ten square feet of it, classifying and drawing pictures of hundreds of little plants for the first time in the world. [18]

> An average of a ton of insects for every acre of a field like that. Deer hoof crushing a flower. Rodents at the roots of it. Birds diving and pecking at it. Big trees crowding it out with their shade. Mushrooms in the warm fall rains. (*Ring* 95)

Welch's emphasis in the poem is on the "subworlds" which combine to make up what Muir experiences as "meadow"--subworlds invisible until enlightened humans like Muir can approach them with a "waking eye." While the term "ecology" is not present in any of Welch's published writings or letters of the period,[19] passages such as this one make clear that by the early 1960's the poet had come to view nature from an ecological perspective--as an infinite number of intricate and interconnecting systems.

"Final City"

The middle years of the 1960's marked for Welch the beginning of his public recognition as a writer. In 1964 several of the poems written at Forks of Salmon were accepted by *Poetry*, then the nation's premiere literary journal, and in conjunction with

Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, he took part in the very successful "Freeway Reading" of June 12 of that year. 1965 brought with it the publication of his second chapbook, *Hermit Poems,* and Welch began more often to read publicly the two decades of poetry he had stored in his notebooks.

With the publication, in 1965, of his third collection of poems, *On Out*, which included both "Chicago Poem" and "Wobbly Rock," Welch had become a well known--if not well paid--member of the San Francisco arts community. Although the poet was now earning a significant part of his living as a teacher of creative writing at the University of California Extension in San Francisco, and supplementing his income with fees from readings, he still had to support himself and his writing mainly by working as a dock worker and ship's clerk (Samuel Charters 552).

Despite his growing reputation as a writer within the San Francisco community, however, Welch again began to grow uneasy within the city. By 1967, the Bay Area counterculture in which he had placed so much hope was deteriorating rapidly, as the city was shaken by racial violence and elements of organized crime moved in to take over Haight-Asbury's profitable drug trade. What had begun as a self-styled utopian experiment now had turned into a crowded scene of anger, violence and dangerously powerful and impure drugs (*IR* II, 145).

In a leaflet distributed in the Haight in early 1967, "A MOVING TARGET IS HARD TO HIT," Welch predicted the immanent destruction of the district and its counterculture by a repressive government afraid of the counterculture's mushrooming growth: "When 200,000 folks from places like lima ohio and cleveland and lompoc and visalia and amsterdam and london and moscow and lodz suddenly descend, as they will, on the haight-ashbury, the scene will be burnt down" (*How I Work* 6). Welch's advice to members of the Haight community was not "to stand there and take it, as the poles did, . . . with futile swords," but instead, to take refuge in the forests and mountains of California:

> Disperse. Gather into smaller tribes. Use the beautiful land your state and national governments have already set up for you, free. If you want to.
>
> Most Indians are nomads. The haight-ashbury is not where it's at--it's in your head and hands. Take it anywhere. (7)

This vision of nature as a refuge from cultural apocalypse was further developed in "Final City / Tap City," a 1968 essay Welch contributed to the prominent underground publication, *The San Francisco Oracle*. In the essay, he contends that the ills associated with the modern city--pollution, over-crowding, and a dangerous alienation from nature--had created the youth counterculture: "a huge number of people who are Immigrants in their own native land" (*How I Work* 19). Warning that "We face great holocausts, terrible catastrophes, all American cities burned from within, and without," the poet envisioned a post-urban world in which America's countercultural "immigrants" will "slip away" until nature reclaims the ruined landscape:

> However, our beautiful Planet will germinate--underneath this thin skin of City, Green will come on to crack our sidewalks! Stinking air will blow away at last! The bays flow clean! (20)

Until this green revolution could take place, however, Welch urged America's youthful counterculture to remain patient and clear-headed, to return to wilderness and to what Gary Snyder would later refer to as "the old ways":[20]

> In the meantime, stay healthy. There are hundreds of miles to walk, and lots of work to be done. Keep your mind. We will need it. Stake out a retreat. Learn berries and nuts and fruit and small animals and all the plants. Learn water.
>
> For there must be good men and women in the mountains, on the beaches, in all the neglected and beautiful places, so that one day we come back to ghostly cities and try to set them right. (21)

By the end of the decade, Welch was ready to take his own advice. In February 1970, he wrote to Katharine George, an old neighbor from his days at Forks of Salmon, telling

her of his life in San Francisco. In the letter, he marvels at his relative financial success as a writer and teacher, noting "I'll make $6,000 this year *as a poet*!" (*IR* II, 167). Yet, despite this long-sought financial reward, there is in the letter a longing to leave what he refers to as "this madhouse of a Bay Area," and return to the land:

> I'm sure (have checked it out) that the Bay Area is better than any urban area in the world, but it just may not be good enough for those, like us, who are blessed with the choice of moving away as a real possibility. I am still not bought. (166)

"Not The Bronze Casket But The Brazen Wing"

Despite the hard-won acceptance as an artist which Welch enjoyed in the late sixties, the poet's life entered a tail-spin during the first months of the new decade. In May 1970 Welch resigned his teaching position at San Francisco's Urban School, citing as a reason his feelings that he could better serve the anti-war and civil rights causes outside the classroom. His life-long drinking problem worsened, and in December 1970 Magda Cregg left him, ending the longest and most stable relationship of his life (*IR* II, 169-76).

In early 1971, Welch planned again to take to the woods. His friends Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg offered to let him build a cabin at Kitkitdizze, a tract of land which they jointly owned near Nevada City, California. Sober for the first time in years, as a result of the prescription drug Antabuse, Welch selected a building site and began to formulate plans for the small cabin which would be his hermitage in the woods, a simple twelve by twenty foot structure with no electricity or running water (*IR* II, 186). It was a task which the poet was ill prepared for--both physically and financially--but one on which he placed the utmost importance. "I absolutely have to do this to survive," he wrote to Magda Cregg, "It's hard but it's real, at last, and I know it is the only way for me now" (*IR* II, 183).

The forest cabin Welch envisioned was never completed. Physically drained by years of hard drinking and the side effects of his Antabuse therapy, and depressed at the

prospect of finding himself at 44, living on the kindness of his friends, on May 22, 1971 Lew Welch disappeared into the foothills of the Sierras, taking with him only a gun. He left behind a note reading:

> I never could make anything work out right and now I'm betraying my friends. I can't make anything out of it--never could. I had great visions but never could bring them together with reality. I used it all up. It's all gone. Don Allen is to be my literary executor--use MSS at Gary's and at Grove Press. I have $2000 in Nevada City Bank of America--use it to cover my affairs and debts. I don't owe Allen G. anything yet nor my Mother. I went Southwest. Goodbye. Lew Welch. (*IR* II, 187)

Despite extensive searching, Welch's body was never found, leading some to speculate, hopefully, that the poet's last note signaled not a suicide, but a planned disappearance--a twentieth century Huck Finn's plan to "light out for the Territory." Albert Saijo, Welch's neighbor from his days at East-West House, eulogizes his friend by wistfully denying his death ever occurred:

> I sometimes believe you went into the mountains that last time and had a truly illuminating experience. That there in the pine-oak woodland or coniferous forest you reran your life and came out ahead of it. That then you crossed over the mountains and descended to the Great Basin where you still are. Your hair has gone completely white but you are younger in the face. You drink nothing but water. You eat wild weeds, comb honey, and the fat larvae of the brine fly that breeds in saline waters. (*Trip Trap* 1-2)

But such pleasant imaginings aside, the numerous references to suicide in Welch's letters, as well as his fragile emotional state at the time of his disappearance, can leave little doubt that the poet did take his own life. Welch's final collection of poems, a slim chapbook published in 1969 entitled *The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings*, offers further evidence that this is the case. *The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings* is a book which would serve

as both a tribute to the California landscape and the poet's final epitaph. The opening line of the book's title poem--"*This is the last place. There is no place else to go*"--speaks to both the time-worn notion of civilization's westward progression as well as the westward path of the poet's own wanderings--including his final walk away from Kitkitdizze (*Ring* 121).

The eclectic volume contains a dozen small pieces in various forms--a haiku, two riddles which Welch refers to as "the first American Koans," a curse against ocean polluters in a brief poem called "Sausalito Trash Prayer"--but the book's centerpiece is the poem which serves as the writer's final statement: "Song of the Turkey Buzzard." The poem is Welch's acceptance of the death of his human form, but more importantly, it is a joyful embrace of his next form, as he envisions himself devoured by--and thereby becoming--a buzzard.

"I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles," wrote Walt Whitman at the end of "Song of Myself," in 1855 (88). Since this fearless acknowledgment of death as a part of the chain of life, numerous American writers had voiced similar sentiments. The most recent, and most local example of this tradition, for Welch, was his fellow Californian Robinson Jeffers. Jeffers's 1963 poem, "Vulture," features an encounter between the sleeping poet and a vulture who circles above him, eyeing him as a meal, only to be frightened away when the bird realizes his prey is not yet carrion. The poem ends with a reverie in which the poet imagines a different outcome. "I tell you solemnly," Jeffers writes:

> That I was sorry to have disappointed him. To be eaten
>
> by that beak and become part of him, to share those
>
> wings and those eyes--
>
> What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment:
>
> What a life after death. (107)

In "Song of the Turkey Buzzard," Welch extends this fantasy of "enskyment" expressed by the earlier poet, and demands it as his own final reality. Where Jeffers views being consumed by a vulture as the "sublime end of one's body," a reworking of the traditional Christian afterlife in heaven, Welch sees the experience not as an end, but as what he calls a "continuance":

> The very opposite of
>
> death
>
> Bird of re-birth
>
> Buzzard
>
> meat is rotten meat made
>
> sweet again. . . (*Ring* 135)

The poem's final stanzas offer the poet's "last Will & Testament," the detailed orders Welch calls the "instructions / for my continuance" in his new form. They harbor not the slightest trace of sadness at the death of his own human form; on the contrary, the lines are emphatic with the poet's sense of wonder at the beauty and efficiency of the food chain he prepares to enter:

> *Let no one grieve.*
>
> *I shall have used it all up*
>
> *used up every bit of it.*
>
> *What an extravagance!*
>
> *What a relief!* (*Ring* 136)

The stanzas which follow are the poem's darkest, an effect perhaps designed to make the biological transformation from man to bird which will follow all the more exuberant. The terminology is harsh and direct--the language of the slaughterhouse rather than the funeral parlor. "On a marked rock. . .," Welch tells his attendants, "place my meat":

> *All care must be taken not to*

frighten the natives of this
barbarous land, who
will not let us die, even,
as we wish.

With proper ceremony disembowel what I
no longer need, that it might more quickly
rot and tempt

my new form (*Ring* 136)

This macabre tone is quickly overturned in the poem's final section, as Welch rejects the traditional trappings of the Western burial ritual, and ecstatically embraces his "new form" and takes to the skies surrounding Mt. Tamalpais:

NOT THE BRONZE CASKET BUT THE BRAZEN WING
SOARING FOREVER ABOVE THEE O PERFECT
O SWEETEST WATER O GLORIOUS
WHEELING

BIRD (*Ring* 137)

The death outlined in "Song of the Turkey Buzzard"--if indeed the term "death" can be used at all in this case--is emblematic of Lew Welch's lifetime struggle to achieve enlightenment by leaving behind "the world that is man," and becoming "a member of the world that is not man" (*IR* I, 196). More than a decade after Welch's disappearance, Gary Snyder dedicated a poem to his old friend, "For/From Lew," in which he comes to terms with Welch's final decision:

Lew Welch just turned up one day,
live as you and me. "Damn, Lew" I said,

"you didn't shoot yourself after all."

"Yes I did" he said,

and even then i felt the tingling down my back.

"Yes you did, too" I said--"I can feel it now."

"Yeah" he said,

"There's a basic fear between your world and

mine. I don't know why.

What I came to say was,

Teach the children about the cycles.

The life cycles. All the other cycles.

That's what it's all about, and it's all forgot." (*Axe Handles* 7) [21]

In Lew Welch's view, and in Gary Snyder's, the poet's final act on that day in 1971 when he walked off into the Sierra foothills may not have been to take his own life, but to give it, to what Snyder has called "that ecstatic Mutual Offering called the Food Chain" (Welch, *Selected Poems* ii).

NOTES

[1] *I Remain: The Letters of Lew Welch & The Correspondence of His Friends*. Ed. Donald Allen. 2 vols. Bolinas CA: Grey Fox Press, 1980. p. 196. Subsequent citations within the text and chapter notes will be abbreviated *IR*.

[2] In a letter to William Carlos Williams dated 14 August, 1951, Welch told his mentor: "I read *Paterson IV*, and I tell you I was drunk with it" (*IR* I, 58).

[3] Apparently not all of Welch's advertising copy took the same positive stance towards nature as his later writing. Aram Saroyan credits him as being the writer responsible for the pesticide slogan "Raid Kills Bugs Dead!" (*Genesis Angels* 109).

[4] This substitution of the colloquial "Murcan" or "Murca" for American or America seems to have been a standard feature of the correspondence among Welch, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

[5] Welch tells his readers in the preface to *Ring of Bone* that "The poems are autobiographical lyrics" (3). Although it would be incorrect to accept this as true for all of the poems contained in the collection, it is quite safe to say that in the majority, including "Chicago Poem," Welch himself is the speaker.

[6] Also referred to at times as "Hyphen House."

[7] In a letter dated 2 May 1960, Welch told James Wilson that "the whole poem meant to carry most of what I've learned from Zen, expressed in an American vocabulary" (*IR* I, 194).

[8] A letter Welch wrote to Robert Duncan conclusively demonstrates that the poem's rock is intended as genuine. Complaining of those who found his poetry too difficult, he wrote: "And still to get ((from *Wobbly Rock*))!!!! the cry 'I don't understand it. Why don't you write so that everybody can understand it.?'

It

is

a

real

rock

My God!!!" (*IR* II, 53-54).

[9] A letter dated 22 September 1960 from Welch to Will Petersen identifies him as the "Berkeley painter" (*IR* II, 9). Welch had seen Petersen's article on Ryoanji, "Stone Garden," in *Evergreen Review* 4, 1957.

[10] Welch claims that this section's opening line is from *Taliesin*, an old Welsh epic. The borrowing is a subtle joke, says the poet, since "this is the history section of this poem, and it's Old Welch." See *How I Work as a Poet & Other Essays*, 82.

[11] Welch was an enthusiastic fisherman for much of his life, so it seems only natural that he would select the figure of a fisherman to stand as a symbol of interconnectedness between man and nature.

[12] Thirty years later, Welch's friend Gary Snyder would echo his views on "the word-game 'Nature'" in his explanation of the title of his 1992 volume of collected poems *No Nature*:

> *No Nature*. Human societies each have their own nutty fads, mass delusions, and enabling mythologies. Daily life still gets done. Wild nature is probably equally goofy, with a stunning variety of creatures somehow getting by in all these landscapes. Nature also means the physical universe, including the urban, industrial, and toxic. But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfil our conceptions and assumptions. . . . There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. ("Preface" unpaginated)

[13] A town Welch described as "only a Post Office and a gradually rotting Oldsmobile under a tree" (*IR* II, 87).

[14] A Western term for those suffering from "cabin fever."

[15] Han Shan: Chinese hermit poet of the seventh century whose "Cold Mountain Poems" Welch's friend Gary Snyder had translated. Ludwig Wittgenstein: (1889-1951) Austrian / British philosopher who, in the years following the First World War, dedicated himself to a life of strict asceticism. Welch had read his *Philosophical Investigations* (Meltzer 196).

[16] As does Jack Kerouac's Ray Smith in *Dharma Bums*. See the novel's final paragraphs: 192.

[17] Identified later by Welch as the "Buddha of Compassion" (*Ring* 82).

[18] Welch may be referring here to a passage from John Muir's essay "The Bee-Pastures" (1894) in which he discusses sleeping amidst "countless forms of life thronging about me": "And what glorious botanical beds I had! Oftentimes on waking I would find several new species leaning over me and looking me full in the face, so that my studies would begin before rising" (*The Mountains of California* 260).

[19] The term's first appearance in Welch's writings comes in a letter to Jim Koller dated 23 January 1971, about an oil tanker spill in San Francisco Bay: "Here there is the panic of those who realize it's all over, that all that ecology stuff was true. . . (*IR* II, 175).

[20] See Gary Snyder's essay, "Re-inhabitation," in *The Old Ways: Six Essays*, 57-66.

[21] More recently, in Gary Snyder's collection *No Nature*: *New and Selected Poems*, the poet again pays tribute to his old friend with the poem "For Lew Welch in a Snowfall" (380). Also, see Michael McClure's tribute to Welch, "A Spirit of Mount Tamalpais," in his 1974 collection *September Blackberries*: 107.

V. "LET US THROW OUT THE WORD *MAN*": MICHAEL McCLURE'S MAMMILIAN POETICS

"If there shall be love and content between the father
and the son and if the greatness of the son is the exuding
of the greatness of the father there shall be love between
the poet and the man of demonstrable science. In the
beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science."

Walt Whitman, introduction to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

"Science walks in beauty."

Gary Snyder, "Towards Climax" from *Turtle Island* (1974)

Beat writers of the 1950's and 60's took a variety of approaches in their attempts to reconnect with the natural world, among them Gary Snyder's emphasis on the physical body and its place in the world, Jack Kerouac's romantic rucksack quest for truth and solace in nature, and Lew Welch's anti-urban withdrawal into the wilderness. Often, these approaches utilized older models--what Gary Snyder has referred to as "the old ways"--as vehicles in this reconnection: Buddhism and other forms of ancient Eastern thought, American Indian religion and myth, as well as the Romantic traditions of eighteenth and nineteenth century English and American literature.

Poet, playwright, essayist, and novelist Michael McClure shares these interests in "the old ways" with several other members of the Beat circle, often relying on them as both source and background for his own literary efforts. More often, however, the primary

vehicle in McClure's nature poetry is not seventh century Buddhism or nineteenth century Romanticism, but instead the twentieth century scientific disciplines of biology and ecology. More than any other writer within Beat Movement, McClure relies on the scientific disciplines of the present as a means of discussing environmental issues and forging his own reconnection with the natural world.[1] Despite the many modern scientific sources of his poetry however, McClure's journey as a writer has taken him even further back into history than those of his colleagues within the Beat circle; his is a journey whose ultimate goal is the "recovery" of what he has referred to as "the biological self" (Mesch 5) and "the frightening and joyous" acknowledgment of a visceral "undersoul" which unites all of nature (*Surface* 26). "My interest in biology," McClure notes, "has remained a constant thread through my searching" (*Surface* 11).

The author of more than forty volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, and plays, Michael McClure has become known as one of the most prolific and enduring figures to emerge from the Beat Movement. He shares a long and rich history with Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, Robert Creely, and many other writers of the San Francisco Beat period. As one of the youngest members of the Beat circle, McClure played an important role as a bridge between writers and artists of the Beat Movement and the region's youth counterculture during of 1960's, and has been a close friend and collaborator with figures such as Richard Brautigan, Bob Dylan, and Janis Joplin.[2] For nearly four decades, what Lawrence Ferlinghetti once called "McClure's lush green ideas" have been a highly visible and controversial topic of both American literary and environmental discourse.[3]

"The Fields of Kansas"

Born in 1932 in Marysville, Kansas, Michael McClure divided his early childhood years between the farmlands of Kansas and the Pacific rain forests of Seattle, Washington, where his interest in nature was heightened by time spent with his maternal grandfather,

physician and naturalist Ellis Johnston. Poems such as his "MEMORIES FROM CHILDHOOD" (included in his 1983 collection, *Fragments of Perseus*), recall the writer's formative years, and an early awareness of a clash between the human and non-human worlds:

I REMEMBER THE FIELDS
of Kansas and the laws

that made
them flat and bare

I know when and where
the field mouse died.

I watched the rivers tried
for treason,

then laid straight,
and the cottonwood and opossum

placed upon the grate
of petroleum civilization! (43)

Educated first at the Universities of Witchita and Arizona, McClure gravitated westward towards San Francisco during his senior year. Following his marriage to Joanna Kinnison, he enrolled at San Francisco State College in 1954. It was here that McClure's long-standing interest in poetry was sparked by a writing course with a poet who would be a mentor to many of the Bay Area's new voices, Robert Duncan. Despite his new teacher's efforts to introduce him to free verse, McClure's early poems display a rigid

formal structure which is absent in much of his later work--the result, perhaps, of his intensive study of Milton, Blake, and Yeats during his undergraduate education. His earliest published poems, which appeared in the prestigious journal *Poetry* when McClure was only 23, are two villanelles dedicated to Theodore Roethke, a fellow Midwesterner also much enamored with the natural world. Even in these early formal poems, there is evidenced a strong desire on the poet's part to experience the world not as a "civilized " human, but on a more instinctual level, as other life forms must. The first of the villanelles, "Premonition," speaks of the poet's desire to see life as a bird views it, and his frustration at finding himself bound to Earth; the final stanza reads:

> The skin and wingless skull I wear grow tight.
>
> The echoes from the sky are never clear.
>
> My bones ascend by arsenics of sight.
>
> Beginning in the heart, I work towards light. (218) [4]

As he matured as a writer, the form, as well as the subject, of McClure's poetry from the mid 1950's onward became reflective of his growing interest in biology and nature. The stiff, imposed structures evidenced in the iambic measures of early poems, such as the villanelles for Theodore Roethke, gave way to innovative free-verse poems which were centered on the page, a form which has become a recognizable trademark of McClure's verse, and one which, according to the poet, "gave the poems the lengthwise symmetry found in higher animals" (*Rebel Lions* vii).

The Six Gallery and *Hymns for St. Geryon*: Unveiling the "Undersoul"

McClure's friendship with Duncan quickly led to associations with others in the rapidly emerging San Francisco poetry community, including Kenneth Rexroth and the mystic surrealist poet Philip Lamantia (King 383-84). In early 1955, he met Allen Ginsberg at a party given in honor of visiting poet W.H. Auden, where Ginsberg told him of his intentions to organize a poetry reading featuring himself and several other young poets

from the area--the event which later become known as the Six Gallery Reading. Here, McClure, along with Philip Lamantia, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Allen Ginsberg, helped to launch the Beat Movement, and his presence at the event helped to instill in the fledgling movement his life-long fascination with the natural world. The poems which McClure selected to read at this, his very first public reading, are indicative of his early environmental concerns. They include "For The Death of 100 Whales," a powerful poem which condemns the slaughter of a pod of Icelandic killer whales by the United States military (and in doing so, predates by more than a decade the many calls for protection of marine mammals which would emerge in the late 1960's), and "Point Lobos: Animism," a poem which provides an early glimpse of what the poet would later refer to as the visceral "undersoul" through which all of nature is united. The poem's final stanzas read:

(I knelt in the shade
By a cold salt pool
And felt the entrance of hate
On many legs,
The soul like a clambering
Water vascular system.

No scuttling could matter
Yet I formed in my mind
The most beautiful of maxims.
How could I care
For your illness or mine?)
This talk of bodies!

It's impossible to speak
Of lupines or tulips

When one may read

His name

Spelled by the mold on the stumps

When the forest moves about one.

Heel. Nostril.

Light. Light! Light!

This is the bird's song.

You may tell it

To your children. (*Hymns* 4-5)

In his 1982 essay "Scratching the Beat Surface," an essay in which McClure argues that nature and ecology were a central theme to many of the poems read at the Six Gallery as well as to many other Beat texts, he recalls his visit to Point Lobos, and his motivation in writing the poem:

> I wanted to tell of my feelings of hunger, of emptiness, and of epiphany. I hoped to state the sharpness of a demonic joy that I found in a place of incredible beauty on the coast of Northern California. I wanted to say how I was overwhelmed by the sense of animism--and how everything (breath, spot, rock, ripple in the tidepool, cloud, and stone) was alive and spirited. It was a frightening and joyous awareness of my undersoul. I say *undersoul* because I did not want to join Nature by my mind but by my viscera--my belly. The German language has two words, *Geist* for the soul of man and *Odem* for the spirit of beasts. Odem is the undersoul. I was becoming sharply aware of it. (26)[5]

Although couched in the philosophical terminology of animism, the ancient notion which holds that all natural phenomena and objects--whether animate or inanimate--possess an innate soul, McClure's early intuitive attempts to "join Nature" seem to draw more from science than from philosophy. McClure has written of "the important, yet

little known reaching out from science to poetry and from poetry to science that was part of the Beat movement" (*Surface* 11).[6] Clearly, such a "reaching out" to science has manifested itself in both the sources and subjects of McClure's own work. Although the majority of his associates during the 1950's in San Francisco were mainly other poets and painters, his closest friend during the period was Sterling Bunnell, a scientist whom McClure terms "a visionary naturalist" (*Surface* 11). Bunnell shared McClure's interest in both nature and consciousness (he would later work in conjunction with Dr. Timothy Leary), and the poet credits him as being the person responsible for his first close look into the biological wealth which Northern California offered: "With him," McClure recalls, "I was able to watch coyotes and foxes and weasels and deer, and walk through savannah country, hike through foothills, go over the mountains, and to the seashore and look into tidepools" (*Lighting* 3).

McClure's first collection of poems, *Hymns for St. Geryon*, published by his friend Dave Haselwood's Auerhahn Press in 1959, and which contains both "For the Death of 100 Whales," and "Point Lobos: Animism," exemplifies the writer's early application of biology to poetry. As William R. King has noted, "Geryon was Dante's beast of falsehood, a fair face atop a dragon's body. For McClure, St. Geryon was the apotheosized conflict between the social facade and instinctual desires" (387). *Hymns for St. Geryon* attempts to bridge this gap between the social facade (i.e. the cerebral trappings of all human culture) and instinctual desires (the body, and what McClure would later refer to as aspects of the "biological self"), and in doing so, the poems make readers aware of the possibility of unifying both aspects of their beings. As McClure notes in the title poem, "Even Geryon (as Geryon) is beautiful but not if you look / only at the head or body" (*Selected Poems* 7). Often, this task is accomplished by means of a microbiological perspective which forces us to view ourselves in close relation to "lower" forms of life, as in the poem entitled "Canticle":

We who do not make way for creatures

OUR CREATURE

Warm blooded we move in a cold sea denying-

-our guts cousins filling the cracks of the earth,

sleeping at the bottom.

Amphioxus, rotifers, arrow-worms hunting their prey,[7]

predators in bodies

of translucence and color, formed

by the element they move about them

AND

hunger!!!!!!

I put off my feelings today let the language

move me tomorrow. A lie

I say! The thing comes out moved

by the man inside me who is a creature sprung

from the chain. Let me regain it. (24-25)

The "thing" to be regained is the poet's own biological identity--an acknowledgment of his role as fellow "creature" and "cousin" to the microscopic organisms the poem describes. Like many of the poems in *Hymns to St. Geryon*, "Canticle" yearns for a biological wholeness, or what McClure has called "the monism of nature," exemplified by both the ancient Taoist view of the universe as a single uncarved block, and by modern scientific theories of ecology. Under such a view, the "amphioxus, rotifers" and "arrow-worms" are not "lower" forms of life, but are, instead, valuable and even "divine" expressions of a common life force. McClure explains:

> Ernst Haekel and Alfred North Whitehead believed that the universe is a single organism--that the whole thing is alive and that its existence is its sacredness and its breathing. If all is divine and alive--and if everything is the Uncarved Block of the Taoists--then all of it and any part is beauteous (or possibly hideous) and of enormous value. It is beyond proportion. One cannot say that a virus is less special or less divine than a wolf or a butterfly or a rose blossom. One cannot say that a star or cluster of galaxies is more important--has more proportion--than a chipmunk or a floorboard. This recognition is always with us. (*Surface* 27).

Meat Science

McClure's poetry can often be difficult, and the poet has at times adopted the abstract expressionist painter Clifford Still's dictum that "Demands for communication [in art] are presumptuous and irrelevant" (*Surface* 26).[8] Although always present (yet not always easily decipherable) in his early poetry, McClure's biological and ecological notions are first clearly described in his 1961 collection, *Meat Science Essays*. The eight essays contained in this slim volume cover a diverse range of subjects--from detailed and vivid descriptions of the author's early experiments with mind-altering drugs, to essays in response to the French surrealist writer Antonin Artaud and the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus. But a common thread which finds its way into each of the essays, as the book's title indicates, is the notion of a shared biological connection among all creatures, human and non-human: "that all," as McClure notes, "are finally creatures of Meat and Spirit" (44).

The *Meat Science Essays* mark for McClure a turning point, as he begins to move from the vision of universal interconnectedness (i.e. the "uncarved block" of Tao) first posited in the *St. Geryon* poems, to a refined and somewhat more narrow view of his role as "mammal." While he in no way abandons his earlier monistic view of nature (and would, in fact, occasionally return to it throughout his career), as McClure notes in his

essay "Reflections After a Poem," the complex differences between humans and creatures vastly different from ourselves prevent humans from fully knowing or understanding them. After first pointing out "our kinship with all creatures," he reserves his true feelings of empathy for species more closely related to humans:

> We feel close to all living creatures here . . . but we feel the most close and the most joined with the warm blooded. We cannot know the universal and philosophical consciousness of deep seas animals. We fill the universe in our sympathy for all being, but moments of extreme vision and beauty swell us out so that we feel immediately more related to a larger group than Man. We become Mammals as we once were Men. . . . Ornette Coleman[9] is a mammal, the snow leopard is a mammal, Schubert is a mammal. (*Meat Science* 79-80)

Asking enthusiastically "What greater thing is there than to fill out the fullness of being a mammal?" (82), McClure admonishes his readers to reconsider their place in the world, and their relationship to the rest of nature. "LET US THROW OUT THE WORD *MAN*!," he urges, and seek in place of this limited role the "mammalian possibility" of "a larger place"(79-80)--a taxonomic broadening from the single species *Homo sapiens* to full membership among the more than 15,000 species of the class *Mammalia*.

Experimentation with hallucinogenic substances was an important source for McClure's evolving view of nature, as it was for other Beat era writers and artists.[10] The *Meat Science Essays* contain several pieces detailing McClure's use of peyote, heroin, cocaine, and the hallucinogenic psilocybin mushroom. Although the author has in recent times cited drugs as being merely one source among many other influences on his thought and writing, McClure's essay, *Drug Notes*, provides an insight into the central importance which his drug experimentation played in shaping his view of nature. McClure himself seems to acknowledge the centrality of his drug experimentation by describing making his first use of peyote the topic of the opening sentence of *Scratching the Beat Surface*, the

book in which he explores the connection between his work and nature: "In 1958 I ate the American Indian drug peyote for the first time" (5).[11]

The "adventure of consciousness" (6) which McClure entered into with his first taste of peyote, may well be at the root of the poet's mammalian vision. In the section on peyote in "Drug Notes," after noting that "We have learned to see by a code first invented by Michelangelo and Da Vinci," McClure writes that to experience the world through the drug's effects "is to know that you've lived denying and dimly sensing reality through a haze" (26). When the aesthetic "code" imposed by human culture drops away, the author finds in its place a universe in which all are "animals":

> All things beam inner light and color like a pearl or shell. All men are strange beast-animals with their mysterious histories upon their faces and they stare outward from the walls of their skin--their hair is fur--secretly far beneath all they are animals and know it. Far underneath the actions they make, their animal actions are still being performed as they walk and smile. . . (26)

McClure's essay, "The Mushroom," from the same volume, describes another drug experiment into what the author calls the "Olympian universe" into which hallucinogenic substances can offer a window (15). Although he notes that when using psilocybin mushrooms, one feels "utterly human and humane," McClure finds here too, a bridge to the non-human world, and an acknowledgment of the "beastliness of mankind" (15). The essay describes a long, mundane afternoon's simple activities--lunch, a drive, a trip to an art museum--turned into a dazzling psychedelic adventure through the use of the mushroom. As he did under the influence of peyote, the poet experiences a vision of the human body apart from the aesthetics of "Michelangelo and Da Vinci," but rather than viewing them as "animals," as he did in the earlier peyote vision, he now views humans as far simpler creatures:

> All of our notions of the human body's shape are wrong. We think it is a head joined on a torso and sprouting arms and legs and genitals and breasts, but we're

wrong. It is more unified than that. It's all one total unity of protoplasm and our ideas of its appearance are too much a matter of habit. (19)

As McClure and his companion enter a vacant church, the essay ends with one of the poet's first experiments with what he calls "Beast Language," a guttural, growling form of poetic "speech" divorced from human meaning and designed to further bridge the gap between species. Standing at the church lectern, still high from the effects of the mushrooms, McClure recalls, "I began to speak in the language of beasts" (21). The essay ends with a poem describing the event, and exemplifying the poet's use of "Beast Language":

By the stained glass windows
of dream hills and landscapes--I raised back my head
AND SANG
into the Olympian world, growling with the worshipping
and directing voice of Man-Beasts!
GROOOHOOOOR GROOOOOOOR SHARAKTAR
GRAHR GROOOOOOR GREEEER
SHROOOOOOOLOWVEEEEEEEEEE.
The white flecks of my spittle
floated like clumps of alyssum in the dimness
of the here, now, eternal, beauteous peace and reality. (21-22)[12]

No doubt because of his life-long preoccupation with the natural world, nature seems at the center of all of McClure's early drug experiments--even his experiments with drugs which have not been traditionally seen as hallucinogenic or mystical. His recollections concerning his first use of cocaine, for example, contained in his essay "Drug Notes," begin with a description of a late night ritual which would seem to preclude any topic except nature from entering into the author's altered consciousness:

> I had come from Walden Pond to New York City. In my hand was a new book pressing an oak leaf from Thoreau's hearth. In the dim apartment a friend poured water out of a bronze vial onto my head. The water was from the Ganges. . . . I was very joyful, it was 3:00 in the morning, hot July, in New York City. Perhaps the river water and Thoreau *alone* could have made me divinely high. (39)

The changes in perception which follow McClure's first cocaine experiment in some ways parallel those which he had undergone while using peyote and psilocybin mushrooms. What the poet now perceives as a facade of social construct falls away, leaving in its absence a new vision, which in this case involves a view of wild nature hidden beneath Manhattan:

> All, all was reality. In the dark of morning by the East River I saw nature made anew--as in any redwood forest of the West. The city becomes nature. The streets of the lower East Side are pastoral and simple fields of summer haze. . . . I saw through the rat's eyes. Grimy barges and ancient factories leaned into eternity. If it shall be our nature to live this way we must know that Nature is here in a strange garment. (40)

While much of McClure's early writing concerning nature seems to stem from an intuitive, often Romantic, sense of empathy towards the natural world (an empathy which was forcefully heightened by a series of intense drug experiences), his interest in biology provided his imagination, and apparently his hallucinations, with a solid mooring. McClure's essay, "Revolt," first published in *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* (a journal which he co-edited along with Lawrence Ferlinghetti and David Meltzer) and later collected in *Meat Science Essays*, exemplifies the writer's use of biological imagery to discuss philosophical, and even political issues facing humans. In the essay, McClure uses the planarian worm[13] as a biological "example of revolt" (57) living in "a smaller universe of clearer beauty and simpler Good and Bad" (61). The author finds, in these small worms, a "basic relevant meaning of revolt to us as many-celled meat-creatures," since the

planaria has the ability to "revolt" through asexual reproduction by dividing its head from its body and forming two new beings. Humans, unable to simply split in half when the head (or mind) and body are in discord, must choose other methods of revolt to maintain the equilibrium between the high powered forces of the human intellect and the often ignored and under-developed "subspirits" of the body (61). Too often in humans, McClure notes, "The Head is Chief and the Body follows" (59). But, like Geryon in McClure's earlier poem, the human form can only be seen as complete when viewed as a whole composed of both head and body, and the "revolt" of the physical side of one's nature (the biological self) in opposition to the powerful forces of the mind (the social self) is an on-going part of this quest for this equilibrium:

> At all times revolt is the search for health and naturality. Revolt is a desire to experience normal physiological processes that give pleasure of fullness and expansion (59).

"Politics is Dead and Biology is Here!"

The middle years of the 1960's marked a period of McClure's career in which he placed more emphasis on drama than poetry. His most famous and most controversial play, *The Beard*, was penned and first performed in 1965. The obscenity trials which resulted from the production would occupy much of the writer's time and energy for the next three years.

During this same period, McClure released a small but fascinating poetry chapbook entitled *Poisoned Wheat*. Written as a protest against American involvement in the war in Vietnam, the book's title refers to the wartime practice of poisoning grain fields in Cambodia. The poet mailed over 500 of the pamphlets to journalists and politicians whom he felt might have some influence on American policy in Southeast Asia (King 394). While in retrospect this seems a relatively naive and futile act, McClure's book was not

without its impact; the real importance, however, of *Poisoned Wheat* was not its small stab at the American war machine, but in its radical merging of biology and politics.

In a poetic manifesto which would foreshadow much of the poet's writing for the next three decades, McClure's *Poisoned Wheat* attempts to look for solutions to the world's catastrophic problems outside the normal channels of politics and ideology. Although the long poem deals ostensibly with the war in Southeast Asia, the war quickly becomes just one symbolic symptom of a much larger malaise resulting from a corrupt society which clings to political dogma rather than biological realities. McClure's response is to divorce himself from the war and the misguided and cruel society which wages it:

I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE
FOR THOSE WHO HAVE CREATED
AND / OR CAPTURED the CONTROL DEVICES
OF THE SOCIETY THAT SURROUNDS ME!
I despise Society that creates
bundles of cruelties
and presses them en masse
against the helpless. (4)

McClure's staunch anti-war stance was a radical one in 1965, a time when opposition to the Vietnam War was still largely smothered beneath Cold War rhetoric of the Iron Curtain, the Domino Theory, and the rapidly accelerating arms race. But far more radical is his insistence that we look beyond political rhetoric to the realization that the Vietnam War was not about a political struggle between Communism and Democracy, but was instead symptomatic of a much larger problem to which neither side possesses a solution. McClure's poem attacks each of the world's prevailing political systems--capitalism, communism and fascism--for their failure to effectively address the problems of life on the planet.

COMMUNISM WILL NOT WORK!

Communism will not create food in quantities
necessary for man's survival.
CAPITALISM IS FAILURE!
It creates overpopulation, slavery,
and starvation. (4-5)

Stating that "I have escaped politics," and that the "meanings of Marxism and Laissez faire are extinct" (6), the poet rejects the political and social systems which have been artificially imposed upon the biological realities of life. Just as he suggested in his earlier essay "Revolt," as well as in the *St. Geryon* poems, the social and intellectual forces of the mind (in this case, the abstract notions of "politics" and "government") have repressed the biological aspects of human life, often resulting in disastrous consequences.

In place of political issues, McClure points to the stark biological realities facing the Earth--realities which have gone unaddressed by both Capitalism and Communism:

The population of the United States will double
by the year 2000. Certain South American
nations double each eighteen and twenty years.
There is no answer
but a multiplicity of answers created by men.
A large proportion of men are on the verge
OF STARVATION!
When density of creature to creature reaches
a certain degree
the ultra-crowded condition is a
biological sink. (6)

The results of the "biological sink" which McClure describes are starvation, exploitation of world resources, and an increasingly repressive and war-like society which has already fallen victim to its own suicide. The poem continues:

WESTERN SOCIETY HAS ALREADY DESTROYED ITSELF!
The culture is extinct! The last sentry
at the gate has pressed the muzzle to his
forhead and pulled the trigger!
The new civilization will not be communism!
POLITICS ARE AS DEAD AS THE CULTURE
they supported! (8)

In place of a culture governed by political theory, McClure offers what Allen Van Newkirk has called a "bioculture" (22). In his brief 1975 analysis of McClure's work as it relates to new frontiers of ecological thought, "The Protein Grail," Newkirk describes the tenets of the bioculturist worldview:

> . . . [B]iocultural thought . . . is distinguished by its emphasis on the wild realities of the landscape as a field for discourse and action. Bioculturists assert a biological interpretation of history; that the human situation is mammalian, that the human mammal has over-domesticated itself and the landscape it utilizes, and that wild nature contains economic and sensate possibilities overlooked by the inherited civilization construct. (22)

With the poet's emphatic line, near the end of *Poison Wheat*, declaring that "NEW SOCIETY WILL BE BIOLOGICAL!" (9), and further, that "POLITICS IS DEAD AND BIOLOGY IS HERE!," McClure demands nothing short of a total reorganization of society along these biolocultural lines. Tellingly, the long poem ends, as it began, with an utterance of McClure's trademark beast language, a "Grahhr" symbolizing humanity's mammalian past--and its mammalian future.

The Early Seventies: "The Shape of Energy"

In the late 1960's and early 70's, McClure spent a good deal of his time and effort on prose works as well as drama. During this period, the content of McClure's writing

became much more thoroughly anchored in biology, as his psychedelic experiences and his early intuitive feelings of an interconnectedness with nature were bolstered by his reading of several biological and ecological thinkers. "In the early seventies," he recalls in his essay "The Shape of Energy," "the thinking of H.T. Odum, of Harold Morowitz in biophysics, and of [Ramon] Margalef in ecological systems did much to clarify my unorganized perceptions of the fifties and sixties" (*Surface* 95).[14] Feeling more certain than ever "that it was no longer appropriate to continue the Descartian division of mind and physiology" (*Surface* 88), McClure turned to science for support for his intuitions.

It was during this period that the poet began to view poetry as an "extension of physiology" and further, to consider the possibility "that a poem could even become a living bio-alchemical organism" (89):

> The mind is inseparable from the body and too much energy has been spent looking at the mind (whether shapely or not)[15] of poetry, and not enough at the body. Similarly, the structure of poetry had often been looked at (though not clearly), but such structure had never been looked at as an extension of physiology. (*Surface* 89)

If the Cartesian split between mind and body can be unified, McClure argues, then similarly, why couldn't a poem be seen as "an extension" of this unified "Bulk" of the poet's mind and body: "extensions of myself as much as my hand or arm are extensions of me" (*Surface* 89). Further, McClure began to envision a poem "that like a wolf or salmon . . .could turn its head from side to side to test the elements and seek for breath. I wanted to write a poem that could come to life and be a living Organism" (*Surface* 89).

As a way of understanding this "bio-alchemical" transfer of energy between poet and poem, McClure began to investigate the writings of Ramon Margalef, particularly his 1968 work *Perspectives in Ecological Theory*. Margalef's section entitled "The Ecosystem as a Cybernetic System" became especially important as "one of the wellsprings of exuberance" in the poet's thought; Margalef's work became, for McClure, a way "to see energy in

action in the bundles and bodies that contain it" (*Surface* 92-3). Out of his reading of Margalef, McClure began to view his own poems--and those of his colleagues in the Beat circle--as biological extensions born of an "organic process" in which one life form (the poet) transfers energy from "a powerful, complex, informed--ultimately stable substrate" (the poet's life experience) to create yet another life form (the poem) (96). In McClure's view, poets such as "Olson, Snyder, Creely, Duncan, Kerouac, Ginsberg, [and] Whalen" (as well as, we are to presume, McClure himself) . . . ."develop the containment of complex energy as they mature. They feed from the energy of the substrate around them as it informs their senses. It is an organic process" (96). As McClure puts it in his essay, "The Shape of Energy," in *Scratching the Beat Surface*, poetry thus becomes "an image of the universe" in which:

> Densified areas of greater organization [the poet] react with nebulous matter in space [i.e. experience, ideas, inspiration] and are informed by it. There is further densification [i.e. the creative process]. It reaches climax. It explodes [the poem is created]--the material retains certain pieces of information and gains more organization [the poem's content and structure] in the explosion--and so forth. (94)[16]

Another key scientific influence on McClure's work during the early seventies was Howard T. Odum's study *Environment, Power and Society* (1971), a work which shares Margalef's interest in the manner which energy functions in nature, and more importantly, one which sparked the poet's interest in the notion of biological diversity. In Odum's scientific text, McClure found ample justification for his earlier feelings of interconnectedness with nature, since Odum's work often focused on the diverse and inscrutable "species networks" which combine to form a healthy and stable eco-system. In his section entitled "Complex and Beautiful Systems," in *Environment, Power and Society*, Odum writes: "Nature reaches its most appealing manifestations of beauty, intricacy, and mystery in the very complex systems: the tropical coral reef, the tropical rain forest, the

benthos-dominated marine systems on the west coasts of continents of temperate zones, the bottom of the sea, and some ancient lakes of Africa" (quoted in *Surface* 83).

In the mysterious and interwoven fabric of such "complex and beautiful systems" as Odum describes, McClure found the scientific support for the intuitive feelings of species interconnectedness which he had been struggling with for more than twenty years. Here was the "uncarved block" of Tao dressed in the garb of Western science--a scientific truth as beautiful, all-encompassing, and terrifying as any peyote vision of the undersoul. All *is* connected, Odum posited, but the message also carried with it a further caution, all *must be* connected in order to ensure a healthy and stable environment.

McClure's poetry of the period bristles with a renewed intensity. No longer was it simply enough to acknowledge humanity's kinship with nature's other life-forms, as the poems in *Hymns to Saint Geryon* did. Odum's models of ecological systems made it clear to McClure that not only were species interrelated, but also strongly interdependent; the survival of one species--and indeed the entire eco-system--could very well hinge on maintaining the diversity of other species within the system. Poems such as "Listen Lawrence" from *Fragments of Perseus* (a piece aimed at converting poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti from a Socialist to a biological world-view), approach the themes of ecological interconnectedness and the need for a biocentric worldview with a reformer's zeal, as he tells his friend:

OUR REAL BODIES ARE NOT DIVISABLE
from the bulks of our
brother and sister beings!
We're alarmed by the simultaneous extinction
and overcrowding of creatures (39)

The poem revisits the idea of a familial relationship between species first posited in "Canticle" twenty years before--although the "cousins" of other species described in the earlier poem have been brought closer into the family fold, and are now tellingly referred

to as "brother and sister beings." Just as "Poisoned Wheat" had done a decade earlier, "Listen Lawrence" places the ultimate blame for the Earth's rapidly dwindling biological diversity squarely on the shoulders of the world's political systems. What is needed to fend off the loss of the planet's species, McClure argues, is not the Socialist reform which Ferlinghetti favors, but a wholesale rejection of all politics: "ANY, ANY, ANY / POLITICS / is the POLITICS OF EXTINCTION!" (41):

We live near the shadow
AT THE NEAR EDGE OF THE SHADOW
((TOO NEAR!!))
of the extermination
of the diversity
of living beings. No need
to list their names
(Mountain Gorilla, Grizzly, Dune Tansy)
for it
is a too terrible
elegy to do so!

COMMUNISM,
CAPITALISM
SOCIALISM,
will do
NOTHING,
NOTHING
to save the surge
of life--the ten thousand
to the ten-thousandth, vast

Da Vincian molecule of which

ALL LIFE,

ALL LIFE

is a particle! (40)

The Eighties and Nineties: "Rebel Lions"

McClure's demand that his friend Ferlinghetti--and all humanity--"come out of the closet-- / OUT OF THE CLOSET OF POLITICS / and into the light of their flesh and bodies!" (*Fragments* 42) remains a constant in his message as the poet enters his sixties. For McClure, the only means of survival is the rejection of political solutions, and the embrace of a new, biologically informed, world-view. In his most recent collection of poems, *Rebel Lions* (1991), McClure returns to the vision he has held since the Six Gallery reading now nearly forty years ago. In a poem entitled "Mammal Life," the poet again discusses the importance of this reconnection to what he has called the "biological self":

The real mammal life

with its clear sensorium

and the wisdom of the gut

and the meat in the blackness

that stretches back in time

to the stars

through the bodies of strange

forefather beasts

is the powerful NEGATIVITY,

powerful negativity,

THAT WE USE FOR OUR REVOLT.

Mammal life is deep and luminous as the belly of a shark

or the white fungi on cedar trunks

in the cool rainforest [17]

AND

it

is

me (109)

Acknowledging the "biological self," embracing humankind's mammalian "wisdom of the gut," and envisioning the universal "undersoul" are the means of McClure's revolt against the political forces he sees as leading to ecological catastrophe--and also his means of reconnecting to the natural world. As he said in a recent interview, his is not a poetry which provides the answers to the problems plaguing the environment; instead, he sees his role as a visionary, aimed at providing "a new path" away from politics and towards biology (*Lighting* 6). In his poem entitled "Villanelle for Gary Snyder," from his 1975 collection *Jaguar Skies*, McClure aligns himself (and supposedly, Snyder) with others who he identifies as revolutionary visionaries:

IN TURN WE GIVE FLESH TO THE REVOLUTION

like Che,[18] Darwin, and Francis Crick

creating visions not solution. (68)

Not surprisingly, McClure finds two of his intellectual compatriots among scientific visionaries Charles Darwin and Francis Crick--the theorist who developed the concept of species evolution, and the Nobel Prize winning scientist who first shed light on the double helix structure of the DNA molecule. For above all, McClure is a poet concerned with science, a poet whose knowledge and interest in biological and ecological issues provide him with a rich scientific "substrate" which allows him to write in what his friend Gary Snyder calls "a specific biological / wild / unconscious / fairytale / new / scientific / imagination form."[19]

McClure's admiration of visionary scientists like Francis Crick is not unrequited. Crick has been an admirer and close reader of McClure's poetry since the mid 1950's, when he

first discovered a copy of "Peyote Poem" in a San Francisco book shop, and he has paid tribute to the poet's treatment of scientific issues in his essay "The Poetry of Michael McClure: A Scientist's View." Unlike many other poets writing today who "are rather ignorant of science" and even hostile to it, Crick notes that: "Michael McClure is so at home in the fantastic world that science has conjured out of ourselves and our surroundings . . . that he takes it all in stride" (23). Crick closes his homage to McClure and his scientifically based poetry with a final tribute which can leave little doubt that he is indeed a poet of science:

> The worlds in which I myself live, the private world of personal reactions, the biological world (animals and plants and even bacteria chase each other through the poems), the world of the atom and molecule, the stars and the galaxies, are all there; and in between, above and below, stands man, the howling mammal, contrived out of "meat" by chance and necessity. If I were a poet I would write like Michael McClure--if only I had his talent. (24)

NOTES

[1] Although the Beats have often been wrongly labeled as anti-intellectual and, at times, anti-scientific, McClure is not alone, among Beat poets, in his use of scientific sources; his friend Gary Snyder has also made extensive use of the scientific disciplines of biology, ecology, and anthropology. See James I. McClintock's excellent discussion of Snyder's scientific sources in "Gary Snyder: Posthumanist," collected in *Nature's Kindred Spirits: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) 109-28. Also, see John Elder's discussion of Snyder's use of science in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 185-206.

[2] Among his many and diverse publication credits, McClure proudly lists "Mercedes Benz," a humorous critique of America's quest for material goods, which he co-wrote with Joplin, and which Joplin later recorded and made popular.

[3] Ferlinghetti's remarks are contained in his introduction to McClure's first book of essays: *Meat Science Essays* (1963): 3.

[4] McClure's poem may have been intended as a response, or a compliment, to Theodore Roethke's poem of the same name (included in his 1941 collection *Open House*). Both poems utilize images of bone as a means of depicting human limitations and mortality. See: *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke.* New York: Anchor Press, 6.

[5] The contrast with Emerson's notion of the transcendental "Over-Soul," which he refers to as "the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related: the eternal ONE," is implicit in this passage, yet McClure makes no direct mention of it until his 1985 collection of journal musings, *Specks.* See McClure's *Lighting the Corners*: 108, and "The Over-Soul," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures.* New York: Library of America, 1983. 383-400.

[6] As evidence of this "reaching out from science to poetry," McClure notes that Nobel laureate Francis Crick, one of the scientists who first shed light on the double helix structure of the DNA molecule, quoted from McClure's early "Peyote Poem" in his 1958 study, *Of Molecules and Men*:

THIS IS THE POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

we smile with it (*Hymns* 42)

See Crick's tribute to McClure in "The Poetry of Michael McClure: A Scientist's View." *Margins* 18 (1975): 23-24.

[7] "Amphioxus": a primitive chordate organism, also known as the lancet. "Rotifer": a minute, multicellular aquatic organism of the phylum *Rotifera*, possessing a wheellike ring of cilia--also known as "wheel animalcule." "Arrow-worms": small, slender marine worms of the phylum *Chaetognatha*, having prehensile bristles on each side of the mouth.

[8] Poet Ed Dorn, commenting on the difficulty of making meaning from McClure's poetry, has noted that readers must approach the work using biology as a key: ". . . contact, if it is ever made," Dorn writes, "is made with all the biological circuits plugged in" (*Views* 88).

[9] Ornette Coleman: (b. 1930) alto saxophone player and key member of the "Free Jazz" school of the early 1960's.

[10] See Allen Ginsberg's poem "Wales Visitation," a meditation on nature inspired by one of the poet's many experiences with LSD, contained in *Planet News: 1961-1967*. See also Clayton Eshleman's "Imagination's Body and Comradely Display," in *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*, for an account of an LSD vision which provided the poet "an interchange between inner and outer worlds" (241). The most complete discussion of the use of hallucinogens among Beat writers can be found in Jay Stevens's *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*: 100-120. LSD advocate Timothy Leary also recalls his early hallucinogenic drug experiments with Ginsberg, Kerouac, Neal Cassidy, and Peter Orlovsky in his 1983 autobiography, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era*: 45-70.

[11] Always the consummate naturalist, McClure's second sentence is "Peyote is, of course, the cactus *Lophophora williamsii*--a small, spineless, flat-topped plant found mainly in the vicinity of Laredo and Northern Sonora" (*Surface* 5).

[12] In the years to come, McClure would continue to make extensive use of "beast language" in his work, including his first play entitled "*!The Feast!*" (1960) written and performed entirely in this invented idiom. A 1960 stage production of the play at San Francisco's Batman Gallery featured a cast which included, among others, Robert LaVigne, Ron Loewinsohn, David Meltzer, Philip Whalen, Joanna McClure and Kirby Doyle (King 389). McClure's 1964 collection, *Ghost Tantras*, includes ninety-nine poems written in beast language.

[13] A species, according to McClure, of "small flat black worms with triangular heads that live in icy streams." Since they possess simple nervous systems, as well as eyes, and utilize a simple process of digestion, McClure calls them "our farthest close-cousins" (*Meat Science Essays* 57).

[14] Gary Snyder has also acknowledged the influence which H.T. Odum and Margalef had on his developing work. See Appendix B.

[15] Probably a comment on Allen Ginsberg's dictum "Mind is shapely, art is shapely."

[16] Others within the Beat circle also seemed in tune with McClure's view of poetry as energy transfer. Gary Snyder calls a sequence of short poems in *Left Out in the Rain* "Tiny Energies," a phrase taken from H.T. Odum's *Environment, Power and Society.* McClure's good friend Richard Brautigan took a less scientific and more whimsical approach to the question of poetry as an organic process of energy transfer with his *Please Plant This Book*, a collection of poetry broadsides printed on packets of vegetable seeds.

[17] McClure notes that the "cool rainforest" he refers to here is Oregon's Olympic Peninsula. *Rebel Lions* 115.

[18] Che Guevara: 1928-67. Cuban revolutionary who was killed while taking part in a popular revolt there.

[19] Snyder's remarks come in an interview with Peter Chowka in *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-79*: 124. Snyder mentions McClure as one of a handful of American poets whom he reads with interest.

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VI. CONCLUSION:

OFF THE ROAD

"And this is the age of Triumph of Beatnik Messages of Social
Foment Coded into the Clatter of the Mass Media over
20 Years Ago! Ha! Ha! Ha! How do we fall down to salute
with peals of Heh heh hehhh! That the Beats created change
without a drop of blood!"

Ed Sanders, "The Age" (1975)

"I *know* somethin' good's come out of all this!"

Japhy Ryder, in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958)

"Range after range of mountains
Year after year after year.
I am still in love."

Gary Snyder, "On Climbing the Sierra Matterhorn Again
After Thirty-one Years" (1986)

While the four writers I have considered in this study--Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure--present the most clearly defined examples of the Beat penchant for a reconnection with the natural world, there were many other artists connected with the Beat Movement who also found nature and ecology among their central themes. The list of poets and novelists associated with the Beat Movement who sought a closer connection to the natural world is a long and prestigious one. It includes such writers as Ken Kesey, whose second, and arguably best, novel, *Sometimes a Great*

Notion (1964) examines the struggle of a family of loggers in the Pacific Northwest. Even the most hardened, cynical and urban novelist in the Beat cadre, William S. Burroughs, has at times demonstrated a yearning for a return to a more pastoral--and even, at times, more primitive--existence. His slim 1963 volume, *The Yage Letters* (a book he co-wrote with Allen Ginsberg), details his adventures as he travels through the jungles and tribal villages of Central America in search Indian shamans who hold the key to the powerful hallucinogenic plant Yage. The result is American literature's first psychedelic travel narrative.

The list might also important include poets at the fringes of this discussion of the Beat movement--poets such as Amiri Baraka: who as Leroi Jones penned a number of powerful anti-urban poems with ecological themes, such as his "A Contract for the Destruction and Rebuilding of Patterson" (1964). Buddhist writer d. a. levy, the nonconformist Cleveland bioregionalist poet of the 1960's should be included,[1] as should Joan Kyger, a poet who critic Michael Davidson has seen as one of a handful of female writers central to the Beat Movement.[2] Kyger has also long concerned herself with nature as poetic subject matter--though not to the extent as her ex-husband, Gary Snyder. Robert Creely, a poet associated with both the Black Mountain School and the early Beat Movement, should also be mentioned; many of his early poems, such as "Desultory Days," exhibit what his friend Michael McClure has termed "awareness of living environment, oneness of time, deepening of consciousness, and myriad-mindedness" (*Surface* 34).[3] The work of three writers of the Beat circle, however--Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and Kirby Doyle--deserve more than just a cursory inclusion in this list; indeed, all three are no doubt deserving of lengthier discussion in some future study.

Allen Ginsberg, the poet seen by many as the central figure of the Beat Movement since its inception, came to his interest in nature and ecology somewhat later than some of his literary colleagues.[4] While many of Ginsberg's earlier poems, such as "Howl" (1955) and "Death to Van Gogh's Ear" (included in *Kaddish*, 1961) show pronounced anti-urban

and anti-technological tenancies, the poet's work refrains from an open embrace of nature until the middle years of the 1960's, when his interest in an ecological view of the world was crystallized by his use of LSD. Ginsberg's ecological breakthrough occurred in July 1967 while the poet was on a tour of the Black Mountain region of Wales near the Llanthony Valley. Following a visit to the ruins of Tintern Abbey--the site of Wordsworth's famous ode--Ginsberg spent an idyllic afternoon roaming the nearby valleys under the influence of LSD (Miles 398). The result was a poem entitled "Wales Visitation," a work which Ginsberg has said "mediates between psychedelic inspiration and humane ecology." [5]

"Wales Visitation" resonates with the poet's reverence and delight in the new-found perspective on nature offered, ostensibly, by the drug, but more deeply, by the unifying concepts of ecology:

> Bardic, O Self, Visitacione, tell naught
> but what seen by one man in a vale in Albion,
> of the folk, whose physical sciences end in Ecology,
> the wisdom of earthly relations (*Planet News* 139)

Ginsberg's lyrical description of his wholistic view of the landscape builds in intensity as the poem continues, shifting from a panoramic scale to a microscopic view in the course of one stanza:

> A solid mass of Heaven, mist-infused, ebbs through the vale,
> a wavelet of Immensity, lapping gigantic through Llanthony Valley,
> the length of all England, valley upon valley under Heaven's ocean
> tonned with cloud hang,
> --Heaven balanced on a grassblade. (140)

Finally this new vision of balance and wholeness becomes overwhelming, as the poet openly embraces the Earth as "Mother" in a moment of ecological epiphany: "Fall on the ground, O great Wetness, O Mother, No harm on thy body!":

I lay down mixing my beard with the wet hair of the mountainside,
smelling the brown vagina-moist ground, harmless,
tasting the violet thistle-hair, sweetness --
One being so balanced, so vast, that its softest breath
moves every floweret in the stillness of the valley floor, (141)

As the poem concludes, the tone shifts from the dramatic breakthrough of consciousness to a more relaxed, meditative state in which the poet attempts to digest what he calls "the vision of the great One" (142). As the effects of Ginsberg's drug vision begin to leave him, they leave behind a scene of lone meditation which recalls the closure of Lew Welch's earlier poem, "Wobbly Rock."

Crosslegged on a rock in dusk rain,
rubber booted in soft grass, mind moveless,
breath trembles in white daisies by the roadside,
Heaven breath and my own symmetric
Airs wavering through antlered green fern
drawn in my navel, same breath as breathes thru Capel-Y-Ffn,
Sounds of Aleph and Aum
through forests of gristle,
my skull and Lord Hereford's Knob[6] equal,
All Albion one. (142)

While Ginsberg's first stirrings of ecological awareness may have begun with the psychedelic experience described in "Wales Visitation," his interest in nature and ecology remained a constant in his writing long after the drug's effects had worn off. In a poetic career which has now spanned five decades, Ginsberg has been the Beat movement's most visible member, and has often been elevated (at times against his will) to the role of countercultural icon and spokesperson. A writer and cultural critic who has been at the center of numerous political causes, Ginsberg brought a wholistic, planetary consciousness

to a number of issues facing America in the sixties and seventies: the Vietnam War, censorship, sexual liberation, and political repression. It is not surprising, then, that he should add concern for environmental issues to this list.

Ginsberg's work from the period of the late sixties and seventies, as evidenced by poems from collections such as *Planet News* (1968), *The Fall of America, Poems of These States* (1973), and *Plutonian Ode, Poems 1977-80*, display the same anti-technocratic fervor which had been present in the poet's breakthrough poem, "Howl." But in these later pieces the rage against industrial America is informed by ecological precepts as well as a new awareness of nature which resulted from Ginsberg's withdrawal into the pastoral landscape of a run-down 90 acre farm near Cherry Valley in upstate New York. Here, with his partner Peter Orlovsky, the poet took up residence in 1968, beginning a lengthy experiment in rural living and organic farming (Miles 412).[7] Farm life offered Ginsberg a respite from the turmoil of the decade, just as it did for the many thousands of members of the sixties' counterculture who fled the cities for rural communes across America. His 1968 poem, "Ecologue,"[8] makes it clear that, for Ginsberg, the turn towards nature was in part a political refuge from the kind of police state envisioned by Kerouac earlier in the decade:

> Eldridge Cleaver exiled w / bodyguards in Algiers
> Leary sleeping in an iron cell,
> John Sinclair a year jailed in Marquette [9]
> Each day's paper more violent--
> War outright shameless bombs
> Indochina to Minneapolis--
> a knot in my belly to read between lines,
> lies, beatings in jail--
> short breath on the couch--
> desolation at dawn in bed--

Wash dishes in the sink, drink tea, boil an egg--
brood over Cities' suffering millions two
hundred miles away
down the oilslicked, germ-Chemicaled
Hudson River (*Collected Poems* 544)

Although certainly less well known than Allen Ginsberg, poet Philip Whalen shares his friend's interests in both ecology and Eastern thought. A Reed College classmate of both Lew Welch and Gary Snyder, and one of the five readers at the 1955 Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco, Whalen's early poems, like those of Welch, combine the sparse imagist style of William Carlos Williams with an appreciation for nature and a sharp wit. His poem "Further Notice" provides a good example:

I can't live in this world
And I refuse to kill myself
Or let you kill me

The dill plant lives, the airplane
My alarm clock, this ink
I won't go away

I shall be myself--
Free, a genius, an embarrassment
Like the Indian, the buffalo

Like Yellowstone National Park. (*On Bear's Head* 45-46)

Whalen's interest in nature and ecology date back to the period in the mid 1950's when he, like several others in the Beat Movement, worked as a fire lookout in the remote Skagit River region of Washington state. The poems from his days in the Washington

wilderness, such as "Sourdough Mountain Lookout" (1956), like much of Snyder's *Riprap* and many of Welch's *Hermit Poems*, portray the experience of the isolated writer gradually reentering and becoming part of the natural world, as in this catalogue of field observations from the lookout tower:

> Ptarmigan hunt for bugs in the snow
>
> Bear peers through the wall at noon
>
> Deer crowd up to see the lamp
>
> A mouse nearly drowns in the honey
>
> I see my bootprints mingle with the deer-foot
>
> Bear-paw mule-shoe in the dusty path to the privy (*On Bear's Head* 47)

Philip Whalen's work, more so than any of his peers', is a poetry which focuses on the external landscape in conjunction with the inner workings of the human mind. Merging with the poet's own voice in "Sourdough Mountain Lookout" are the remembered voices of Heraclitus, Empedocles, Buddha, and the poet's own father--voices which add an intellectual and historical grounding to Whalen's wilderness observations, and which provide a window into the poet's moments of meditative reflection, as the mind examines itself, searching for the poet's place in Western history--and in the natural world:

> Everything else they hauled across the Atlantic
>
> Scattered and lost in the buffalo plains
>
> Among these trees and mountains
>
> From Duns Scotus[10] to this page
>
> A thousand years (*On Bear's Head* 47-48)

Although "Sourdough Mountain Lookout" takes its title and its setting from the actual locale of Whalen's Forest Service post, the poem is steeped, as is so much of Whalen's work, in the Buddhist concept that the natural world is illusory. "What we see of the world is the mind's / Invention . . ." he writes (*On Bear's Head* 51). As Whalen explained to me in a recent interview, his nearly forty years of study of Buddhist texts have led him

to a paradoxical view of the natural world which attempts to show compassion for all of nature while at the same time denying its actual existence:

> As I understand it the Buddhist approach to the natural world is paradoxical. On the one hand life and the world are both impermanent and illusory. The world and the self are one. Contrariwise one must take great care to give up all activity which creates attachment to the self and to the world, to live in Enlightenment as much as possible and to be of help to all beings. Delusion and Enlightenment cannot exist independently. You are obliged to save the world and everything in it--not only this world but the myriad worlds which also exist.

For Whalen, who since the mid 1980's has lived as a Zen priest working with both the Santa Fe and San Francisco Zen Centers, the world is illusory and impermanent, yet deserving of an abiding and all-encompassing love:

> The sun itself! Dying
> Pooping out, exhausted
> Having Produced brontosaurus, Heraclitus
> This rock, me,
> To no purpose
> I tell you anyway (as a kind of loving) . . .
> Flies & other insects come from miles around
> To listen
> I also address the rock, the heather,
> The Alpine fir (*On Bear's Head* 48-49)

One of the most intriguing voices of the West Coast Beat period is also one of the least well known. Poet Kirby Doyle, a writer who has worked on the fringe of obscurity for more than three decades, has much in common with his friend and mentor, Lew Welch--especially in regards to nature. Like Welch, Doyle's writing never garnered the critical attention and mass appeal which many of his friends and associates in the Beat

Movement enjoyed. And like Welch, he has at times experimented with a life lived close to the natural world; he spent the twelve years from 1968 to 1980 in the California wilderness, living alone near Mt. Tamalpais northwest of San Francisco (Foye 167).

The years he spent apart from civilization provided Doyle with what he has called "the green key" (quoted on Foye 167) to his later work--a fresh and revitalized understanding of nature as the central pivot around which all else revolves. Doyle's writing since his return to civilization in 1980 has focused almost entirely on nature as the source of American language and culture. Doyle's hundred page poem, "Pre American Ode," is an attempt at rediscovering "Pre," the natural essence which Raymond Foye has described as "the prime matter that existed *prior* to man--it is destiny--a genius inherent in nature, in the land--preexisting" (167):

> thy Genius
> find thy tongue,
> thy language,
> thy speech;
> find within thyself America,
> America.
> For America,
> thou art th' West. (quoted in Foye 167)

Like Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Doyle's "Pre American Ode" is an expansive and multi-faceted work, with diverse references to history, classical poetry, and the sciences; the lyrics of Sapho, the tenets old Norse law, and the scientific discoveries of American horticulturist Luther Burbank are all woven into a complex poem--a poem whose subject and source is nature:

> Nature, Burbank--[11]
> freedom, genius,
> vault & lock--

Muir & Jack London
Th' American--
primordial verse & sacred!
Here American Earth
establishing no god,
just Nature, & nature (quoted in Foye 167)

The Beat Goes On: Voices of the Second Generation

Given the massive appeal of Beat writers among American youth of the 1950's and 60's, it is not surprising that the Movement had a broad stylistic and thematic influence on subsequent generations of the nation's poets and novelists.[12] A number of writers, too young to be fully involved with the inception of the Beat Movement in the mid 1950's, nonetheless identified with the Beats, and in some cases, became their legitimate literary heirs: poets such as Charles Upton, Antler, Robert Hass, Gary Soto (and some would argue, "Language" poets such as Lyn Hejinian). In many cases, these younger, or second generation, Beat writers shared the same veneration for the natural world expressed by Kerouac, Welch, Snyder and McClure a decade earlier. Of this group of second generation Beat writers, Richard Brautigan and Ed Sanders stand out as important links between the Beat era and the counterculture of the 1960's--especially in regards to nature.

Sometimes referred to as "the last Beat," poet and novelist Richard Brautigan was an integral part of San Francisco's free-spirited literary scene of the 1960's. A friend and associate of Lew Welch, Robert Creely, Jack Spicer, and others in the Bay Area arts community, Brautigan shared his close friend Michael McClure's fascination with nature and landscape, but lacked McClure's exuberant vision of ecological wholeness.[13] Instead, for Brautigan, nature--particularly American nature--was in a fallen state and showed little or no hope of revival. A great deal of Brautigan's writing, as John Cooley has noted, expresses "through irony, visions of pastoral loss, if not despair" (10). In Brautigan's

America, technology and greed had commodified or destroyed what was left of the wild landscape, and the notion that post-modern humanity could ever be reunited with the natural world becomes the stuff of dark humor, as in his poem, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" from his 1968 collection *The Pill versus the Springfield Mine Disaster*:

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors

and joined back to nature,

returned to our mammal

brothers and sisters,

and all watched over

by machines of loving grace. (1)

The loss of the wild and the pastoral is also the subject of Brautigan's best known work, the quirky and elegiac novel *Trout Fishing in America*. The novel, which quickly attained a cult following among American youth after its publication in 1967, is an offbeat yet poignant elegy for the spirit of wild American nature, which Brautigan personifies as a mythical--though almost fully developed--literary character called "Trout Fishing in America." Brautigan's novel fairly wallows in grief over the fallen state of the natural world since the death of "Trout Fishing in America," who dies early in the novel, the victim of asphyxiation in a polluted stream (33). A maudlin humor pervades his description of the ruined and commodified landscape (one chapter is entitled "A Walden Pond for Winos"), culminating in the darkly hilarious chapter entitled "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," in which all of nature, including an entire trout stream eco-system, is reduced to second-hand sale at a grimy salvage yard. When the novel's protagonist inquires about purchasing the stream, the sales-clerk responds that he's selling it "by the foot":

"We're selling the waterfalls separately of course, and the trees and birds, flowers, grass and ferns we're also selling extra. The insects we're giving away free with a minimum purchase of ten feet of stream."

"How much are you selling the stream for?" I asked.

"Six dollars and fifty-cents a foot," he said. "That's for the first hundred feet. After that it's five dollars a foot.

"How much are the birds?" I asked.

"Thirty-five cents apiece," he said. "But of course they're used. We can't guarantee anything." (104)

At the same time Brautigan was working and writing on the West Coast, New York City poet Ed Sanders, another of the younger voices of the Beat Movement, was also turning his talents--and his sense of humor--towards preserving the natural world. Arguably the most political of the writers within the Beat Movement, Sanders has enjoyed a long and very colorful career as both poet and radical political activist. As the owner of New York City's radical Peace Eye Bookstore, the founding editor of the spirited avant garde journal *Fuck You / A Magazine of the Arts* (whose motto was "Total Assault on the Culture")[14], and the driving force behind the proto-punk / political folk-rock band, The Fugs, Ed Sanders has long used his art as a political forum---first for the nuclear disarmament and anti-Vietnam War causes, and more recently, for the environmental movement.

Since fleeing New York City after his wife was the victim of a mugging in 1974, Sanders has lived a rural existence near Woodstock, New York where he has been active in both local and national environmental causes. As the editor of *The Sanders Report*, a newsletter focusing on the region's environmental, social, and political concerns (Peck 319-20), Sanders is a poet who, like Gary Snyder, is intimately involved with the issues surrounding bioregionalism and the love of "place," and his poems, such as "At Century's End," often deal with planetary environmental issues--such as global warming--by focusing closely on their local impact:

In the
100 years
of warming

the birch grove
hobbles

across Route 28

& up the valley

toward the

Arctic Circle (*Hymn* 57)

At times, however, Sanders's poetic voice leaps beyond the role of chronicler of environmental destruction, as the poet displays an intimate, at times overtly sexual, relationship with nature. Poems such as "Spiritual Topography," from his 1993 collection *Hymn to the Rebel Cafe*, often reflect an eroticized landscape similar to that which is evidenced in so much of Snyder's poetry:

Blend your

spirit

into

the

rush

of your river

Let the

whirls of your brain

fit in with

the contours

of the ground you love

for

when the curves

of your spirit

flow out to embrace

the curves of the land

That's
love
That's
habitat
That's
the kissing
of landforms

with your soul. (27)

Often, Sanders blends this love of his local landscape with a much more pragmatic message--one which warns his readers about the hidden costs of American industrialism, and which calls for a reexamination of the nation's environmental policies. "The worst drug," Sanders writes, in his poem "At Century's End," "is the culture of greed, demolishment / & destruction of open land" (*Hymn* 53). For more than thirty years, the primary target for the poet's scorn has been the American nuclear industry and its use of nuclear materials for power, weapons, and in "harmless" industrial applications.[15] Sanders's poem, "The Chain," from his collection *Thirsting for Peace in a Raging Century*, examine the long-term impact of a tiny chip of radioactive material on his community:

For 15-thousand years
the plutonium
in the smoke detector
lay in the Woodstock dump

till the day

the grade-blader scraped it out
& smashed it to chiplets
the chipmunk pulled
to the pouch of his cheeks

& during
the next 200
years

it caused
6 cancers

in a skunk
a crow a deer
a dog a dog
and Johnny McQuaife (*Thirsting* 220)

From his position near Woodstock, Ed Sanders continues to write and agitate for the cause of nature, making a reputation for himself as one of the most environmentally conscious and politically vocal members of the Beat Movement. As the title of his collected works indicates, Sanders is poet who is, like many of his friends and colleagues within the Beat circle, "Thirsting for peace"--and environmental justice--"in a raging century."

From Six Gallery to Earth Day--and Beyond

The decade and a half between the Six Gallery reading in 1955 and the first Earth Day celebration in 1970 saw a monumental change in American attitudes towards nature. The new decade of the seventies brought a new ecological awareness to the nation, as well as a

new sense of respect for nature. Interest in outdoor sports--camping, backpacking, fishing, and birding--was at an all-time high, as Americans returned to the wild in record numbers. Membership in conservation and environmental groups, such as the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, skyrocketed. New environmental legislation burst forth from Congress at a pace unparalleled in American history: the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972, and finally, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Lyon, *Lande* 14).

American readers reflected this new green awareness with a renewed interest in classic works which explored the complex relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world. Henry Thoreau's neglected 1854 classic, *Walden*, underwent a rediscovery by American youth--in large part because of its message of non-conformity appealed to the new counterculture, but also because of the author's urgent appeal for a reconnection with nature. The essays of John Muir enjoyed a similar revival. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac,* a book which had enjoyed a relatively small readership since its publication in 1949, now began to sell steadily as readers became more and more receptive to its author's ecological reworking of the traditional Western view of nature, which insisted that humans view themselves as "a plain member and citizen" of "the land community" rather than the "conqueror" of it (240).

Often marginalized in the first half of the twentieth century because of its "quaint" and "romantic" subject matter, writing which focused on nature began to enter the American literary mainstream in the 1960's, beginning with Rachel Carson's 1962 warning of the ecological hazards of pesticides, *Silent Spring*. Six years later, Edward Abbey published his humorous, beautiful, and often vitriolic tribute to the wild lands of the Southwest, *Desert Solitaire*.[16]

In the 1970's, the groundswell of public interest in ecology went hand in hand with a renaissance in American nature writing, as ecology, and the newest catch-phrase, "the environment," found their way into dozens of best selling works. The decade saw the rise

to popularity of a score of new writers who focused on the natural world, among them Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez, Edward Hoagland, Jim Harrison, and Peter Matthiessen. In a manner unrivaled since the "nature craze" of the early twentieth century, Americans were expressing a renewed interest in nature and environmental literature.

Evidence suggests that Beat writers like Snyder, McClure, Ginsberg, and Kerouac may have played an important role in this shift in American attitudes towards nature--especially among American youth. The widespread appeal of Ginsberg's poetry, and even more importantly, Kerouac's early novels, gave hundreds of thousands of American youths what may have been for many their first exposure to a literature which questioned the values of American industrialism and took a positive stance towards the natural world. While it is difficult to trace the impact of a particular novel or body of poetry on the national mood, there is a tremendous amount of anecdotal evidence to suggest that a great many men and women who would become environmental activists in the seventies received their first jolt of environmental awareness from Kerouac's fiction, and that the very real "rucksack revolution" of the 1960's prophesied in *The Dharma Bums* may well have been made up of young people who carried a copy of the novel in their pack. "I once had a friend who went around the world (abt. 1959) . . . ," wrote Lew Welch, "who said that everyone he met on the road had got started through either Kerouac or Alan Watts."[17] A first-hand account of the kind of transformation Welch describes comes from Gary Lawless, a poet and Earth First! activist from Maine:

> In 1967 I found a book on the rack in Palmer's Stationary. The cover blurb claimed it was "The book that turned on the hippies--by the man who launched the hippie world, the daddy of the swinging, psychedelic generation." The book was, yes, *The Dharma Bums*. I had not heard of Jack Kerouac and didn't know what the dharma was, but from the first page I had a new community, a new identity. I had joined the "rucksack revolution." (122)

Similarly, socio-linguist Suzie Scollon recalls her own 1960's rucksack odyssey, traveling on foot through the forests of the Pacific Northwest "under the influence of *The Dharma Bums*" and its hero Gary Snyder, the man Kerouac had deemed "a great new hero of American culture." Her narrative indicates that, by the mid 60's, the Beat penchant for a reconnection with the natural world, as expressed by Kerouac and Snyder, had already become internalized as a part of the counterculture's oral tradition:

> As I traveled around the continent with very little money, cooking rice and lentils by Primus or campfire, I was playing out a trend started by Snyder and others decades before. It was a tradition passed on largely by word of mouth. . . .
>
> Snyder's contribution to culture was only beginning to be felt, vaguely, by a generation dissatisfied by the postwar rush for prosperity--and a generation suspicious of the old culture found in books. I suspect Snyder's influence was spread as much by readings and talk as by print. (422)

Snyder's poetry and essays--while not as popular in the early years of the Beat Movement as the work of Ginsberg or Kerouac--no doubt ultimately proved even more influential. Commenting on the impact of Beat literature on American attitudes concerning nature, Snyder recently wrote:

> Some of these Beat writings were available in the early days of the environmental movement. My own work certainly contributed to the post-1970 rise of the movement called "environmentalism." *Myths and Texts* was, and perhaps continues to be, the only contemporary poem that addresses clearcutting and logging in any detail. And then the "Four Changes"[18] which was widely circulated as a booklet before being included in *Turtle Island*. *Earth House Hold* (1969) has a number of ecological points to make. (mail interview)

The early writings of Snyder, McClure, Ginsberg, and others within the Beat Movement have had repercussions far beyond the transformation of individual readers, they have also been cited as a key source for environmental ethicists and philosophers such

as Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions--the chief proponents of the environmental philosophy known as Deep Ecology. In a 1974 interview, Snyder recalled that a central--although too often unarticulated--Beat complaint was that the industrial America of the 1950's was dangerously out of touch with the natural world. "You must remember," he said:

> . . . that we [the Beats] never really articulated what we wanted except like what I recall articulating in several conversations with Allen [Ginsberg] and Jack [Kerouac] and possibly with Phil [Whalen] was a critique of the national state as an unworkable entity, for one thing, and a critique of industrial civilization as being self-destructive because of its lack of understanding of the nature of biological systems. I remember working that out in the 50s. (McKenzie "Moving the World" 10)

The vision which Snyder recalls "working . . . out in the 50s" with other Beat writers, is a rough, but remarkably accurate, thumbnail sketch of the Deep Ecology perspective developed in the 1970's by the Norwegian environmentalist and philosopher Arne Naess. Deep Ecologists, like Naess and his American counterparts Bill Devall and George Sessions, take as their primary goal "Living as if nature mattered," and like the Beats, they offer a critique of what they call "the dominant, modern worldview"--a critique which, among other things, places more emphasis on biological, ecological, and community concerns than on economic, industrial, or technological "progress" (Devall and Sessions 69).

The Deep Ecology agenda for the future of the Earth stresses harmony with nature (rather than dominance over it), "biospecies equality" (rather than a view of nature as human resource), and the adoption of reasonable limits on population growth and consumption (rather than "material / economic growth for a growing human population"), and bioregionalism (rather than a falsely imposed central government) (69).[19] In addition to these practical tenets, Deep Ecology also stresses a reworking of humankind's

philosophical and spiritual framework in regards to nature, by encouraging exploration of Native American and Far Eastern belief systems such as Zen and Tao.

In the twenty years since the Deep Ecology perspective has emerged, it has become perhaps the single most powerful and pervasive philosophical foundation for the environmental movement--both in the United States and abroad. Devall and Sessions, the two philosophers who have done the most to articulate the stance of Deep Ecology to American audiences, have long credited Beat writers--especially Gary Snyder--as an important source of the new relationship with nature which they champion. Their text, a compendium on both the sources and the practical applications of the movement, entitled, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered*, is dedicated to Arne Naess and:

Gary Snyder

poet, mountaineer,

student of Eastern and Native American traditions,

teacher, reinhabitant of the western slope, Sierra Nevada (v)

The authors' tribute to Snyder continues with numerous quotations from him throughout the text. In the chapter entitled "Some Sources of the Deep Ecology Perspective," the authors note that "Among contemporary writers, no one has done more than Gary Snyder to shape the sensibilities of the deep ecology movement. In both his poetry and essays, Snyder has been laying the foundation for the "real work" of reinhabiting this continent" (83). In a later essay, "Gary Snyder: Post-modern Man," Sessions notes that Snyder's greatest contribution to Deep Ecology may lie in his daily existence in what the poet calls the "Shasta bioregion," and the "real work" of being actively involved with this community. Snyder's life--as much as his writing--make him a living example of the philosophy of Arne Naess, says Sessions: "Gary has essentially filled in the concrete detail of spiritual bioregional living and political activity that is implicit in Naess' more abstract philosophical articulations" (367).[20]

While Sessions and Devall single Snyder out as the most powerful literary influence on their evolving thought, the two authors also cite other Beat writers as sources for Deep Ecology. The pair credits Allen Ginsberg and Allan Watts, along with Snyder and several other Zen adepts, with furthering the popularity of Taoism and Buddhism in America during the 1950's and 60's--thereby furthering the work, begun by Emerson and Thoreau, of exposing Americans to Eastern belief systems which advocate "organic unity" and "biocentric equality":

> In the 1950s, the so-called Beat poets such as Ginsberg and Snyder began translating Japanese and Chinese poetry based on their own developing ecological consciousness.[21] The poems and prose of Dogen, Chuang-Tzu, Hua-yen and other Indian, Chinese and Japanese classic writers were taken down from the dusty shelves of libraries . . . and brought to groups of people engaged in the "real work" of cultivating their own ecological consciousness. (100-101)

Similarly, environmental historian Roderick Nash credits Beat writers--especially Kerouac and Snyder--with the 1950's swing towards Buddhist and Native American belief systems and the resulting attitudes of biocentric equality and a oneness with nature (*Rights* 114-15). While Devall, Sessions and Nash mention only Snyder, Ginsberg and Kerouac by name in their discussion of Beat sources of the Deep Ecology perspective, it is clear many other writers of the Beat period may also have had an impact on its formation, including Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, and Denise Levertov. [22]

"Moving the World a Millionth of an Inch"

It would be easy to overstate the centrality of nature to Beat literature, as I believe Michael McClure does slightly, when he says, in *Scratching the Beat Surface*, that "Much of what the Beat Generation is about is nature" (11). But there can be little question that in the works of Snyder, Kerouac, Welch, McClure, and several others within the Beat Movement, the quest to find meaning and oneness within the natural world became one of

the most important themes. As Gary Snyder notes, however, the Beat legacy may not be merely a specific reverence for nature, but more generalized attitude of youthful revolt which spilled over into the environmental cause:

> The real influence of the Beats, worldwide, was to show young people that they had the power and the language, their own language, to raise their concerns and issues and come out fighting, in poetry and politics, outrageously, with humor and information. Nature being only one of the territories. (mail interview)

In a 1974 interview on the occasion of the "City Lights in North Dakota" Writers' Conference--a Beat retrospective featuring himself, Ginsberg, McClure and others--Snyder was asked about the lasting impact of the Beat movement and its successes in transforming the American consciousness. He responded:

> . . . [W]hat Allen and I and the rest of us can say realistically, with absolute surety and with great pride, is we have moved the world a millionth of an inch. But it's a real millionth of an inch. That much happened. Not nearly as much as people think, or would like to ascribe to it [the Beat Movement], but what it was, was real . . . . If you can move the world a millionth of an inch, you've got a chance. (McKenzie "Moving the World" 12-13)

Snyder's typical humility nearly masks his pride in being part of one of this century's most important literary and social movements. Snyder and his colleagues did indeed "move the world" in some very real ways, and they did so on a number of fronts. The Beats were a crucial catalyst in cracking open the stifling conformity of the American 1950's, and an important foundation for the counterculture of the 1960's. Their open-form poems, unconventional novels, and radical manifestos gave voice, in common speech, to a powerful yet unexpressed undercurrent in American culture--one which questioned the direction of post-war American life as well as its values. Their works questioned the wisdom of America's military-industrial economy, sought a deeper spirituality through Zen and experimentation with drugs, and broadened the boundaries of American literature with

a frank and open discussion of human sexuality--"For which," John Clellon Holmes has written, "they were called nihilists, obscurantists, dope & sex fiends, and corrupters of literary values" (10).

But, Holmes points out, despite their popular image as literary outlaws and artistic innovators, Beat writers had deep roots in earlier literary traditions, what he refers to as "older continuities," which allowed them to transcend or reject a contemporary society in which they felt alienated: "Innovators? Yes. But like all the most consequential innovators, these writers were concerned with the re-connection of broken circuits. . . "(10). For many writers of the Beat Movement, one of the most important of these "older continuities" of which Holmes speaks was the ancient and world-wide literary tradition of the quest for meaning, beauty, and wholeness in the natural world.

Writers like Snyder, Kerouac, Welch and McClure did indeed seek a reconnection with the natural world, and in doing so, became an important part in a literary tradition which spans from the Cold Mountain poems of Han Shan, to the Native American oral tradition, and through the writings of Henry Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. As active participants in this tradition, Beat writers brought to it their own unique sensibilities--ecology, Zen, the counterculture's openness towards sexuality, and what they saw as the visionary possibilities of drugs. The result was a body of literature more biocentric, more ecologically aware, and more spiritually attuned to nature than any which had preceded it in American literature. Snyder, Kerouac, Welch, and McClure sought--and achieved--nothing short of a new relationship with the natural world, and in doing so, gave rise to one of Beat literature's most enduring contributions.

NOTES

[1] See Gary Snyder's appraisal of this relatively unknown poet's work, "The Dharma Eye of D. A. Levy" in *The Old Ways*: 49-55.

[2] 174. See Davidson's excellent discussion, "Appropriations: Women in the San Francisco Renaissance," in his *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*: 177-99.

[3] Even this, of course, is a woefully incomplete list. A more complete Beat / Nature roll-call should include Ed Dorn, Joanna McClure, Lenore Kandel, Philip Lamantia, John Montgomery, Peter Orlovsky, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Anne Waldman.

[4] Ginsberg's friend Gary Snyder recalls that the author of "Howl" was "still developing the nature sensibility" as the time of the Six Gallery reading in 1955.

[5] Jacket notes from *Planet News: 1961-67.*

[6] The name of a local geological formation.

[7] Orlovsky has also written a number of poems dealing with life at the farm in Cherry Hill. See his collection *Clean Asshole Poems & Smiling Vegetable Songs: Poems 1955-1977* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1978).

[8] The poem's title is probably adapted from the Roman poet Virgil's *Eclogues*, one of the earliest examples of the pastoral tradition.

[9] Eldridge Cleaver: Black Panther Party Leader, who was at the time in Algiers evading prosecution in the U.S. Timothy Leary: Harvard psychologist turned LSD guru, who spent part of 1968 in prison on drug charges. John Sinclair: Michigan political activist, also jailed in the late sixties on marijuana charges.

[10] Whalen's ancestral home in Ireland.

[11] Luther Burbank (1849-1926) American horticulturist and developer of many plant varieties.

[12] Actually, the influence of the Beats extends far beyond American borders; in the 1990's there is probably even more interest in the Beats in Europe than in the United States. See Inger Thorup Lauridsen and Per Dalgard's *The Beat Generation and the Russian New Wave* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990).

[13] See McClure's recollection of his friend Brautigan, "Ninety-one Things About Richard Brautigan," in *Lighting the Corners: On Art, Nature, and the Visionary* , 36-68.

[14] In its eleven issue run from 1962-65, Sanders's *Fuck You / A Magazine of the Arts* published most of the writers associated with the Beat Movement and often featured pieces with environmental themes, such as Michael McClure's environmental manifesto "Poisoned Wheat."

[15] Sanders's finest early poem, entitled "Poem From Jail," is the result of his 1961 arrest for an act of civil disobedience which occurred when he and other activists attempted to board a Polaris submarine to protest the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Butterick 473).

[16] During this same period, American attitudes towards nature and wilderness began to be seen as fitting subjects for serious historical study. Peter Mathiessen's 1959 book, *Wildlife in America*, provided a comprehensive history of species extinction in North America, and Roderick Nash's1967 study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, began to explore a new branch of history which could accommodate human as well as non-human participants.

[17] *I Remain: The Letters of Lew Welch & The Correspondence of His Friends*: Vol. II, 176.

[18] "Four Changes" is a radical environmental manifesto written in the late 1960's by Snyder, and later included in the "Plain Talk" section of his 1975 collection, *Turtle Island.* Several other Bay area writers helped with revisions and suggestions, among them Michael McClure, Richard Brautigan, Alan Watts, Stewart Brand, and Diane de Prima.

[19] For a more complete discussion of the sources and goals of the Deep Ecology movement, see *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith,

1985), especially chapters three and five: "The Dominant, Modern Worldview and Its Critics" (41-50), and "Deep Ecology" (63-78).

[20] Interestingly, in the same essay, Sessions recalls his first encounter with Snyder and his ideas--as Japhy Ryder in Kerouac's 1958 novel, *Dharma Bums* (365).

[21] Devall and Sessions are probably incorrect about this point, in part. While Ginsberg has, without question, done much to extend the cause of Buddhism in America, unlike Snyder he does not speak Chinese or Japanese, and he has not translated any poems from these languages.

[22] In a 1994 interview with me, Snyder indicated that he felt the writings of Kerouac, Welch, Ginsberg and Whalen were also in some way responsible for the shift towards a Deep Ecological perspective. See Appendix B.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A:

CHRONOLOGY

1922:

--Jack Kerouac is born in Lowell, Massachusetts.

1923:

--Philip Whalen is born in Portland, Oregon.

1926:

--Lew Welch is born in Phoenix, Arizona.

1929:

--Allen Ginsberg is born in Newark, New Jersey.

1930:

--Gary Snyder is born in San Francisco, California.

--The population of the U.S. is 122 million.

1932:

--Michael McClure is born in Marysville, Kansas.

1944:

--Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs meet in New York City.

1946:

--William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (Book One).

1948:

--Gary Snyder, Lew Welch and Philip Whalen meet at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

--Robinson Jeffers's *The Double Axe*.

--Theodore Roethke's *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

1949:

--Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac.*

1950:

--Population of the U.S. is 151 million.

--Kerouac's *The Town and the City.*

1951:

--Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us.*

1952:

--John Clellon Holmes's *Go.*

1954:

--One hundredth anniversary of the publication of Thoreau's *Walden.*

--Scott and Helen Nearing's *Living the Good Life.*

--Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Voice of the Desert.*

1955:

--Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco first brings attention to the Beat movement.

--Snyder and Kerouac share a cottage in Mill Valley, California--the period chronicled in *Dharma Bums.*

1956:

--Snyder leaves U.S. for a five year stay in Japan to study Zen and Oriental languages.

--Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems.*

--Robert Marshall's *Arctic Wilderness.*

--Kenneth Rexroth's *In Defense of the Earth.*

1957:

--Kerouac's *On the Road.*

--Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen.*

1958:

--Kerouac's *Dharma Bums.*

--Alan Watts's "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen."

1959:

--Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians.*

--Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America.*

--McClure's *Hymns to St. Geyron and Other Poems.*

--Snyder's *Riprap.*

1960:

--Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler.*

--Snyder's *Myths and Texts.*

--Welch's *Wobbly Rock.*

--Whalen's *Like I Say.*

--Ginsberg travels to South America in search of the hallucinogenic plant yage.

1962:

--Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring.*

--Kerouac's *Big Sur.*

1963:

--Burroughs and Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters.*

--McClure's *Meat Science Essays.*

1964:

--Snyder, Whalen and Welch take part in San Francisco "Free Way Reading."

--The Wilderness Act establishes a National Wilderness Preservation System.

1965:

--Kerouac's *Desolation Angels.*

--Snyder's *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End.*

--Welch's *Hermit Poems* and *On Out.*

1967:

--Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America.*

--Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind.*

1968:

--Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire.*

--McClure's *Hail Thee Who Play.*

--Snyder's *The Back Country.*

--Welch's "Final City / Tap City."

1969:

--John Hay's *In Defense of Nature.*

--Snyder's *Earth House Hold.*

--Whalen's *On Bear's Head.*

--Jack Kerouac dies in St Petersburg, Florida.

1970:

--Snyder's *Regarding Wave.*

--"Earth Day" is first celebrated.

--The Clean Air Act of 1970 establishes national standards for air quality.

--The population of the U.S. is 205 million.

1971:

--Lew Welch disappears into the California foothills, the victim of an apparent suicide.

1972:

--McClure and Snyder attend United Nations Environmental Conference in Stockholm, Sweden.

1973:

--The Endangered Species Act becomes law.

--Welch's collected poems, *Ring of Bone.*

1974:

--Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.*

--McClure's *September Blackberries.*

1975:

--Snyder wins the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Turtle Island* (1974).

--Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang.*

--McClure's *Jaguar Skies.*

1977:

--Snyder's *The Old Ways.*

1980:

--Snyder's *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979.*

--Kirby Doyle begins work on "Pre American Ode."

--The population of the U.S. is 226 million.

1982:

--McClure's *Scratching the Beat Surface.*

1983:

--Snyder's *Axe Handles.*

--Whalen's *Heavy Breathing.*

--McClure's *Fragments of Perseus.*

1984:

--Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-1980.*

1986:

--Snyder's *Left Out in the Rain.*

1987:

--Ed Sanders' *Thirsting for Peace in a Raging Century.*

1990:

--Snyder's *Practice of the Wild.*

1991:

--Sierra Club publishes *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life* to commemorate the poet's 60th birthday.

--McClure's *Rebel Lions.*

1992:

--McClure's *Lighting the Corners: On Art, Nature, and the Visionary.*

--Snyder's *No Nature: New and Selected Poems.*

1995:

--Burroughs' *Ghost of Chance*

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B:

AN INTERVIEW WITH GARY SNYDER

The following is a transcript of an interview with poet, essayist, Buddhist scholar, and environmental advocate Gary Snyder which was conducted via the mail in July / August 1994 while Snyder resided at Kitkitdizze, his home near Nevada City, California, in what Snyder refers to as the "Shasta Bioregion."

PHILLIPS: In his book *Scratching the Beat Surface*, Michael McClure notes an early and strong interest in nature and ecology among the readers at the 1955 Six Gallery reading. Did you also find this to be the case? How do you react to McClure's statement that the Beats are "the literary wing of the environmental movement"?

SNYDER: It's hard to say how much interest the readers at the Six Gallery reading had in nature. A finer definition in terms is called for. If by interest you mean one who backpacks, climbs, does forest or range work, is a member of a conservationist organization, is a naturalist, then Rexroth and I were the only ones. But of you mean a sensibility open to nature, tuned to the landscape, then Philip Whalen is certainly included. Michael McClure's interest was that of the naturalist and conservationist. Allen [Ginsberg] and Jack [Kerouac] Lawrence [Ferlinghetti] were still developing the nature sensibility.

I think one could make an argument that some Beat writers were the literary wing of the environmental movement, but only by degrees. There was of course a movement prior to 1970; it would have been called the conservation movement. I was a part of that, so was Kenneth [Rexroth]. You can check the that history out if you haven't already in

Steven Fox's book *The American Conservation Movement* from the University of Wisconsin Press. I had been a member of the Wilderness Society, the Mazamas, the Sierra Club from early on, and had been a seasonal worker in both the logging industry and with the U.S. Forest Service.

Some of these Beat writings were available in the early days of the environmental movement. My own work certainly contributed to the post-1970 rise of the movement called "environmentalism." *Myths and Texts* was, and perhaps continues to be, the only contemporary poem that addresses clearcutting and logging in any detail. And then note the "Four Changes" which was widely circulated as a booklet before being included in *Turtle Island*. *Earth House Hold* (1969) has a number of ecological points to make. Kenneth [Rexroth], Michael McClure, Philip [Whalen] to a lesser degree, Allen [Ginsberg] somewhat later (after "Wales Visitation"). The real influence of the Beats, worldwide, was to show young people they had the power and the language, their own language, to raise their concerns and issues and come out fighting in poetry and politics, with humor and information. Nature being only one of the territories.

PHILLIPS: You once told an interviewer that the Beat generation was "a gathering together of all available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed heretofore, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum." In my reading of your work, and the work of Jack Kerouac and Lew Welch, I've been struck by the number of references to Thoreau and Muir. How has your reading of Thoreau and Muir influenced your writing?

SNYDER: Has my reading of Thoreau and Muir influenced my writing? To some extent. I read Thoreau the summer of 1953 while on sourdough Mountain lookout, and re-read it again while working on a ship at sea in the late '50's. I read Muir as an adolescent, and then read him again in the mid-80's when teaching "wilderness writing" courses at UC

Davis. Muir inspired me, as a lad, on the practical level of boldly going out and staying longer in the wood with less gear; and having the nerve to do solo trips. So I did (for example) some lengthy trips the summer of 1948 in the mountains north of Mt. St. Helen's in the Washington Cascades, including some third-class rock scrambles. I felt that Muir's prose style was a bit too un-self-critical and over-luxurious to want to be influenced by it, though. As far as an influence from Thoreau, his effect hung fire some decades until I started the essays in *The Practice of the Wild*, where his influence can be seen from place to place. I avoid trying to sound like Henry, I feel his *Walden* style is too acerbic, too willfully balanced and paradoxical, too precocious. I have the same criticism of Annie Dillard who has taken on some of his mannerisms.

PHILLIPS: With its call for an ecologically based system of ethics and a life grounded in place, Aldo Leopold's 1949 *Sand County Almanac* seems to share many of your concerns. When did you become familiar with Leopold's work, and has it been an influence on your own thought and writing?

SNYDER: Aldo Leopold. I didn't read Leopold until I came back to the United States in 1969, and first read *Sand County Almanac*. I enjoyed the writing and certainly the ideas, but I don't think it influenced my work. (A lot of what we're talking about here is a large scale cultural movement, which does not only involve literature but various kinds of activism and cultural transformation.)

PHILLIPS: Although you've often rejected the label of "Beat poet," it seems undeniable that you share some common aesthetic points with other writers within the Beat movement. One of these, it seems, is a penchant for pushing the bounds of what some might call "literary decency." Ginsberg's *Howl*, McClure's *The Beard* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* all faced obscenity trials which helped to liberalize and broaden the bounds

of poetry, drama, and the novel. Although your poetry hasn't faced legal challenges, your work also openly and honestly discusses the naked, the erotic, the scatological, and it has often done so within one of the most traditionally genteel of American literary genres: nature writing. I'm referring here to poems such as "Song of the Taste," "Song of the Tangle," and "Beneath My Hand and Eye the Distant Hills, Your Body," among others. Thomas Lyon has said that you brought "the bright clean air of the mountains" to the subculture; might it also be said that you brought to the mountains, and your description of them, the subculture's openness towards the body and sexuality? Do you think of poems, like the ones I've just mentioned, which merge erotic elements with description of nature, in the tradition of American writers such as Whitman and Lawrence, or are they the product of Chinese or Japanese poetic traditions?

SNYDER: There's a good reason why my work has never been subjected to legal challenges; it is simply not as shocking, nor does it push the bounds of decency, anywhere near as far as does that of Burroughs, Ginsberg, or McClure. My work reflects in some cases simply the vernacular of the rowdy working class. As for the eros I bring to nature, I guess I must have gotten a push in that direction from Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, but I doubt much came from Whitman. And I do feel that nature writing in earlier times was much captured by "gentility." Now of course everybody is talking about the erotic of this and that so now there will be the erotics of nature. And for me I guess nature is just naturally sexy.

PHILLIPS: In his new book, *Kindred Spirits*, James McClintock points to three twentieth century scientists who seem to have influenced your poetry: Eugene Odum, Howard T. Odum, and Ramon Margalef. Are there others?

SNYDER: Scientists who have influenced my more recent work (that of the last 25 years). Indeed the Odum brothers and obliquely the wonderfully technical works of Dr. Margalef. Also, G. Evelyn Hutchinson and his neat little volume *The Ecological Theater and the Evolutionary Play*. More recently the work of conservation biologist Michael Soule, an eminent figure in the field of conservation biology; the work of a biophysicist from Yale, Harold Morowitz; and I'm going to take a detour here through some social scientists and political philosophers: Karl Polanyi, Ivan Illich, Carolyn Merchant, Joseph Needham's work on China, William Cronon's environmental history, Donna Haraway, Noam Chomsky--and back to biological science--the landscape ecology/forestry work of people like Larry Harris with island biogeography theory; the ethnobotany of Kat Anderson and Tom C. Blackburn; the ethnobotanical work of Gary Paul Nabhan. James Gleik's *Chaos*. Stewart Kauffman's *The Origins of Order* (which I don't find easy) and also right now I'm reading *How Monkey's See the World* by Cheney and Seyfarth, really good animal behavior work, that I got onto while I was in Africa in April visiting with one of their students, Ryne Palombit, who is in northern Botswana living with a baboon band and learning exactly what they do together.

PHILLIPS: In recent years, Buddhist attitudes concerning reverence towards the natural world have become a mainstay of American environmental philosophy, as well as an important source for the Deep Ecology perspective. Do you think that your Buddhist-inspired writings, along with those of Kerouac, Welch, Ginsberg, Whalen and others within the Beat circle, can, in part, account for this?

SNYDER: The answer is yes. The deep ecology books quite clearly credit where they think they got it from, you can check it out: but in George Sessions' *Deep Ecology* I don't think you'll find much mention of Beat writers other than myself. A review I just read in *Audubon* magazine of the recent biography of Ed Abbey says that the book shows that

Abbey was a student at Stanford at that time, went up to San Francisco, and was influenced by the Beat scene.

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C:

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP WHALEN

The following interview with poet, novelist, and Zen priest Philip Whalen was conducted via the mail in March 1994 while the poet resided at the San Francisco Zen Center. The answers to the questions I posed to Whalen arrived with a brief hand-written note dated March 27, 1994, which read:

> Dear Mr. Phillips,
>
> Your questions are very difficult. I've done the best I can to find answers for them. Difficulties are multiplied by the necessity of having to dictate my answers and having them read back to me several times over since I can't actually see well enough to write for you myself. I hope what I have come up with will help you.
>
> Yours faithfully,
>
> Philip Whalen

PHILLIPS: I'm interested in the connections between Beat writers and work which took them outdoors, since work so often becomes the raw material for poetry. How did your time as a fire watch in the Skagit River country during the mid fifties affect you as a writer?

WHALEN: Living where you must chop wood for the stove and carry water to cook and clean with is enough to change anybody's point of view, writer or otherwise. Sometimes you don't carry water, you carry snow and melt it. A great deal of snow is necessary for the purpose. After all the chores are done there is time to re-read all of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and some of the longer 18th century English novels and a few of the larger

Russian ones. Such reading supplies one's vocabulary with words which are not generally used in current newspapers and magazines. The contemplation of nearby lakes and mountain peaks simultaneously stimulates and calms the mind and imagination as do frequent encounters with wildlife--bears, deer, marmots, etc. It was during this period of time that I learned I could write in my own way rather than to follow academic prescriptions as to form, composition, metrics and diction.

PHILLIPS: To the best of your recollection, what did you read at the Six Gallery reading? In *Scratching the Beat Surface*, Michael McClure notes a fascination with nature and ecology as a dominant theme among the poets at the reading; did you find this to be the case?

WHALEN: I can only remember a poem called "Martyrdom of Two Pagans" which does not appear in any of my books. Now that I think of it I must have read "The Roadrunner" and "If You're So Smart, Why Ain't you Rich?" Other people who were present might remember whatever else I read. I would agree that there was a common concern among us about the values of protecting and preserving the natural world. I don't believe I thought of myself as anything like an ecologist.

PHILLIPS: How and when did you come to Buddhism?

WHALEN: I felt that I could make a real commitment to Buddhist study and practice after having read the three volumes of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* by D.T. Suzuki, *The Diamond Sutra*, *Zen Teaching of Huang Do*, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, *The Lankavatara Sutra*, and *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.* I had practiced various forms of meditation since 1946 but it was not until the 1950's that I became interested specifically in zazen practice which I pursued in a haphazard way. I didn't begin formal Zen study

with a teacher until February 1972 when I became a member of the San Francisco Zen Center under the direction of zentatsu Richard Baker-roshi.

PHILLIPS: I've been puzzled by Lew Welch's relationship with Buddhism. Much of his work (i.e. "Wobbly Rock" and many of the poems in *Hermit Poems* and *The Way Back*) seem firmly rooted in Buddhism, yet in an interview with David Meltzer in 1969, he referred to Buddhism, and other religions, as "mind trash" and seemed to reject it, favoring instead a view of God in nature. In your view, as someone who knew Welch well, was his devotion to Buddhism a serious one, or was it of more of a passing nature, as Kerouac's seems to have been?

WHALEN: Both Welch and Kerouac had a very deep but not very lasting interest in Zen Buddhist practice. Welch however actually put in a fair amount of effort trying to practice zazen. After several years he said: "You don't have to sit with your feet all folded up in your lap to understand anything. All of us already see and know what it's all about anyway." As far as I know Lew never talked about God in this connection.

PHILLIPS: A very big, very general question: How do you think the Buddhist beliefs held by yourself, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac impacted on your writing about nature?

WHALEN: As I understand it the Buddhist approach to the natural world is paradoxical. On the one hand life and the world are both impermanent and illusory. The world and the self are one. Contrariwise one must take great care to give up all activity which creates attachment to the self and to the world, to live in Enlightenment as much as possible and to be of help to all beings. Delusion and Enlightenment cannot exist independently. You are obliged to save the world and everything in it--not only this world but the myriad

worlds which also exist. But you mustn't suppose that "I" am saving or losing anything. [Crossed out: What you call the "impact" of this teaching is upon my writing.] The way I write is to show as clearly as possible what I see without getting entangled in false sentiment or synthetic excitement. I am not trying to sell Buddhism or anything else. I call it poetry because that's how it feels to me. When I am working at a poem or whatever I can sometimes experience the feelings I receive from reading the old masters. Some people enjoy reading what I write. Some who have read it say that they enjoy hearing me read it at which time it becomes more accessible to them. Several millions of people don't know or care whether I have written anything or not. I only write when I feel like I have to.

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